PARENTAL ADVISORY

border line

The Comics Magazine

#14 September 2002

In this issue:

Peter David talks about his years on The Incredible Hulk

Plus other interviews:

Jay Faerber and Ian Richardson

Peter Hogan

Matt Wagner talking about the new Grendel series

Features and articles on:

Hawaiian Dick - Aloha Image Comics.

Australian Picture Books

San Diego con report

Reports from Britain's little con - Caption 2002

Digital Webbing's Gutwallow

Peet! Clack - Young Gun

Drawing Board from the rain-swept Czech Republic

The Verdict - the best comics reviews section anywhere!

Miffy by Wiley and Kermode and Comics 2040 by Paul Rainey.

Plus the usual columns, reviews, previews, news and comics strips!

BORDER LINES POINT & CLICK INDEX

IN THIS ISSUE...

It's That Man Again – *Phil Hall's new look editorial.* 3

Internet Soulsearching – *David McLintock's trawl around the internet for classic artists continues with David Law.* 20-21

Miffy - *Ady Kermode and Terry Wiley's sexy young airhead in an amusing tale of pedantics and semantics.* 21

Australian pictures – *Joss O'Kelly looks at words with pictures from the land of Aus..*26-27

Vivat Grendel – *Andrew Cheverton talks to Matt Wagner about the new Dark Horse series...* 28-30

San Diego – *Mangaverse co-writer Kevin Gunstone went to his first big US convention and this is what he brought us back.* 30-32

The Caption Noir Report? – *Adrian Brown and Mike Kidson with reports from each of the two days of the UK Small Press convention. Photos throughout the magazine from Terry Wiley and Selina Lock...* 33-34

Gutwallow – *Digital Webbing's new title. This is one Gingerbread Man not for the eating!* .. 35-36

Continental Drift - *Kevin Schomburg looks at a comicbook with a Sean Connery look-alike and a sexy woman with a fat belly!* 37

Issues - *Carol's back and this time Grant Morrison can't hide...* 38

What Is Manga? - *Kevin Hill looks at Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind...* 39

Transatlantic Meditations - *Arnold T. Blumberg has been having a very busy month.* 40

Comics Milestones – *Mike Kidson looks at the key moments in Silver and Golden Age comics - not!* 41

The Blank Page – *Chev spends some time talking about masturbation...* 42

12 O'Clock Lock – *Selina Lock takes a look at this year's Caption Convention and ponders the future of the small press!* 43

Man on a Mission – *Martin Shipp talks about Spongebob Squarepants and compares comics to animation!* (that's what it says here...) 44

Comics 2040 – *Comicbook nonsense from 2040 brought to you by the unfathomable Paul ('Hello luvvy') Rainey. We don't know what he's on... but we want some!* 45

The Verdict – *Borderline's jury of reviewers – attempting to cover everything from pamphlets to graphic novels. Have they reached the right Verdict? Do you agree with the Borderline Jurors? Plus reviews of books, Zine Seen spotlight, mainstream and alternative!* 46-59

Beautiful Losers – *Martin Shipp waxes lyrical about Thriller. Was it really a load of nonsense or did it actually have a plot to lose?* 60-61

Young Guns – *Peet! Clack is an artist with a bright future. He might come from Swindon in Wiltshire, but that isn't any reason not to like him or his forthcoming Captain Bastard.* 62-64

Drawing Board – *The Czech Connection! Tomas Prokutep gives us a guided tour of some of Czechoslovakia's brightest stars!* 65-67

World of Heros – *Chris Spicer and the WOH team's satirical news coverage...* 68

SPOTLIGHT

THE HULK YEARS... *Peter David relives his nine years on The Incredible Hulk, as Phil Hall casts a critical eye over one of Marvel's most highly acclaimed series of the last 40 years!* 4-14

NOBLE CAUSES! - *Jay Eales talks to Jay Faerber and new artist Ian Richardson about their surprise hit...* 15-17

HAWAIIAN HOLIDAY! *Mike Sivier talks to Clay Moore about his new Image series set amid the tropical 50th state of the Union.* 18-19

DOWN HOGAN'S ALLEY!! *Peter Hogan has been around a bit and now finds himself back at DC, working with Alan Moore and finding life is pretty good. Jay Eales talks to the writer about his life...* 22-25

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THE COMICS MAGAZINE

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Martin Shipp ..... publisher
(martin.shipp@borderline.mediahall.co.uk)
Phil Hall ..... editor
(editorial@borderline.mediahall.co.uk)
Mike Kidson ..... deputy editor
(mike.kidson@borderline.mediahall.co.uk) .. production
Andy Winter ..... reviews
(reviews@borderline.mediahall.co.uk)
Mike Sivier & Jay Eales ..... news
(news@borderline.mediahall.co.uk)
(jay.eales@borderline.mediahall.co.uk)
John Parkinson ..... webmaster
(john.parkinson@borderline.mediahall.co.uk)
Dan Black ..... publicity
(publicity@borderline.mediahall.co.uk)

This month's above and beyond the call of duty person: Tomas Prokutep for braving the floods in Prague and countless other obstacles to make damn' sure we got his Czech artists feature in on time. He almost drowns while others complain about relatively trivial things...

Other thanks this month go to Peter Hogan, Steve Griffin, Clay Moore, Jay Faerber (this is becoming a habit!), Kevin Gunstone, Peet! Clack and Peter David.

Cover design by the unbelievably busy Jim Campbell, Noble Causes original cover art by Ian Richardson! Cheers Bladey! Colours by Alienor Johnson - darlin! ☺

Editorial (snail mail) address:
BORDERLINE, 45 Fullingdale Road,
The Headlands, Northampton,
NN3 2PZ England
Advertising and editorial queries call
01604 513867 or e-mail
phil.hall@borderline.mediahall.co.uk

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IT'S THAT MAN AGAIN

Phil Hall's new Borderline editorial column...

WE'RE too good for some. We're not good enough for others. We're worthy of comments, even if we don't ask for them, and yet, equally, we can be ignored – by those who feel they are "superior" in some way.

I don't care though. You see...

The day after #13 went live, we had our 1,000,000th download. And trust me, my team and I have enough experience working with computers to be able to read log files and interpret information. Borderline has been downloaded more than one million times. I'm not suggesting for a second that we've got one million readers - God, no. I'm just saying that we're downloaded by an average of 83,000 people – worldwide – *every* month and if you multiply that by the 13 issues we've had so far it comes to more than one million downloads. Pretty impressive, huh?

This rather large and quite amazing fact certainly impresses the hell out of me.

That's because for all the area covered by Borderline - for all the countries it's "visited", for every email, letter or phone call I've had from somewhere other than the USA or the UK – I still think of Borderline as being an Anglo-American product aimed at my fellow comics collectors in those two once great countries.

But we're not! Of those average 83,000 downloads, nearly half come from other countries. Over the coming months, as our name becomes even more synonymous with quality comics journalism, that percentage is going to grow and those of us who have English as a first language will become the minority. This isn't a dream. It's a fact.

The problem is, and I've used this analogy many times before, many comics fans from the US and UK are like born again Christians. They are, in their own minds, the only *true* comics readers. All other readers of 'alternative' comics (and I include 'foreign' in that example) are like believers in some other religion. Fortunately comics fans are meek and mild enough not to start wars over their differences. Well, not physical ones anyhow...

No, our problem is we're British, so not only do we have to convince the Americans we actually know something about comics, we have to prove to the Europeans that we understand the art, the South Americans that we're actually sincere and are not just interested in stealing their home grown talent, and we need to get the Japanese to just read us. I think many of you will agree that we've faced an uphill struggle to be recognised as a serious comics magazine and as we achieve that goal our readership base increases. We're great and we know we are... (even if we are Brits).

However, it means some people forget what they're dealing with. Some people forget to think outside of the box. To some people we're still just here to promote anything.

We've *never* been here to promote "anything".

Recently the editor of a small press comic approached me. If enthusiasm could be bottled and sold you could make millions from this guy. He believed in his product. He believed in the artists, writers and letterers he'd assembled. He believed his comic was so good, he didn't stop to look, read and realise just how awful it really was. He wanted me to authorise a feature about his comic. I was diplomatic and gave him a few standard replies. He persevered, as I suspected he might, but not because of his enthusiasm; no, because he figured we were a British magazine, therefore we cover all things - good or bad - that are British. WRONG!

Actually, very wrong, and on all counts. We had to make a judgment call and take the possibly unfair decision of determining a quality threshold as far as untried and untested creators were concerned. We've given exposure to some things that many of you might deem "crap", but we've covered them either because some of the editorial team (some of whom are known "good" comics reviewers) have recommended them, or – in most cases – someone whose opinion we respect has recommended them. Scott McCloud guided us towards Justine (Nowhere Girl) Shaw and we trust him... As do many of you, whether you're in the USA, UK or anywhere else.

We've had to make "quality" decisions. We've rejected work by known comics writers! Can you believe that? Someone who's been fortunate enough to write comics for a living has had an article turned down. Why? Because it wasn't up to the high standards we set ourselves. It was also shoddy and read like it had been thrown together by someone with no respect for his own work. I don't compromise with quality. Even if I once did, I no longer have to.

Having to make a harsh decision about something isn't being "superior". That thought never enters my head. I think I'm a good editor and a good editor has to make decisions. Sometimes they're as tough as hell and sometimes they're cut and dried. This month I had to be honest with myself and accept that a critique I've waited years to write isn't worthy of the three-part feature I'd envisaged. In fact, it isn't even worthy of two parts.

I finished the first part and realised that I had nothing new to add. I had no new revelations. No good recommendations. No particular thoughts at all about the subsequent issues of the comic I wanted to write about. To say I felt jaded would be a bad pun considering the character I'm referring to. Actually, I felt a bit blue. Because I knew the only person who actually wanted to see the other two parts would be me and I'd already talked myself out of writing them. It was a tough decision. But really it was easy... I was being a good editor and understanding what my readership wanted. Sometimes being an editor is just being able to stop people from feeling superior. And sometimes it's being able to determine the shit from the sugar.

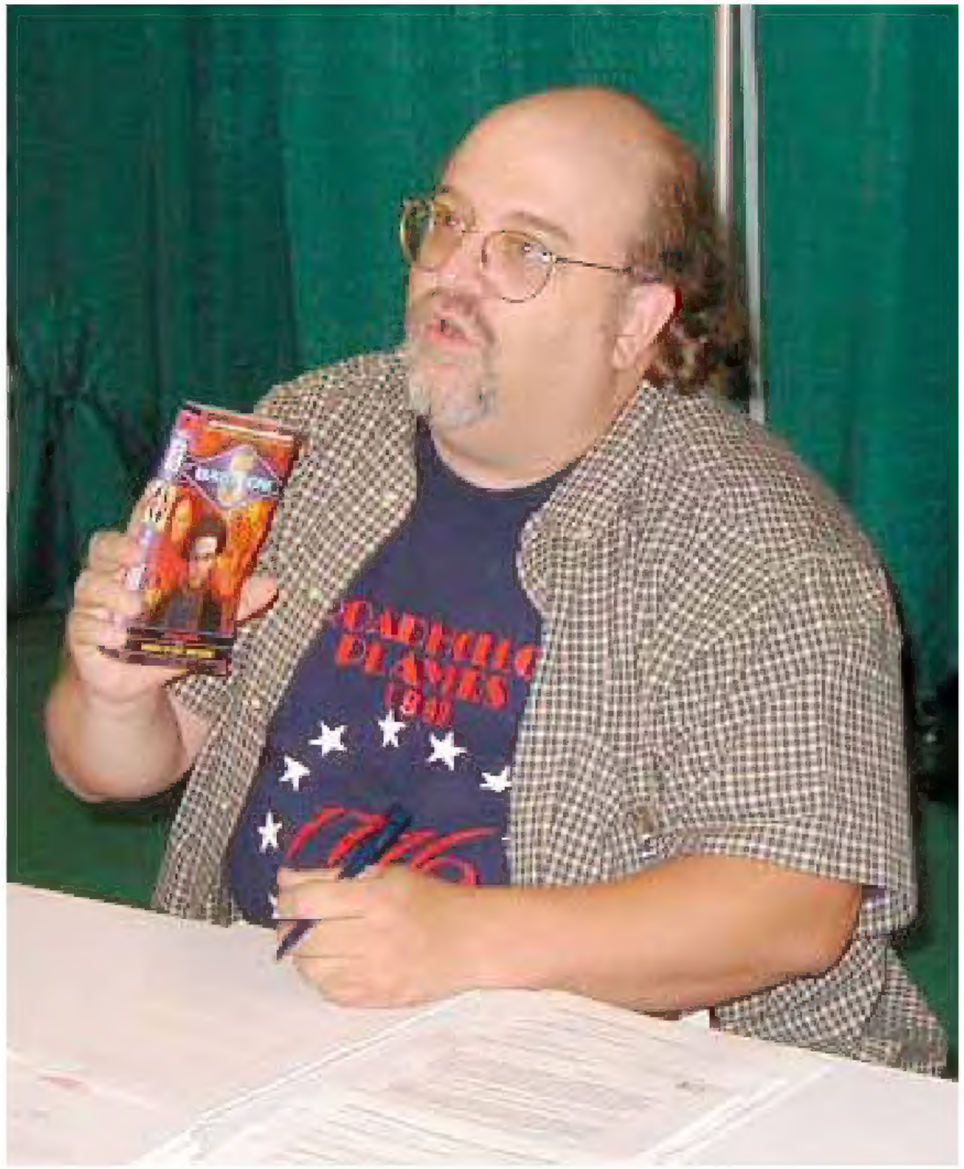
Borderline at Caption 2002 (or rather in the pub next door to Caption): From left to right – holding lager is Paul (Albino Halifax actor) Rainey, next to him the ever dependable Borderline publisher Martin ('No shit?') Shipp, in the middle looking (un)cool is Phil (super fly guy?) Hall, sitting next to him whispering profanities from behind his hand is Jay (It's mine I tells you) Eales and about to tackle a big plate of pub food is reviewer Neil (tnuc) McOnie. Terry (Surreal Con Photos) Wiley took the pic and the barmaid (not seen) was from New Zealand. Other Borderliners' were there – they were just at the convention, and not in the pub...

NOT JUST ANOTHER HULK

THE PETER DAVID YEARS

Stan Lee presents
PETER DAVID WRITER
TODD McFARLANE PENCILS
KIM DeMULDER INKS
RICK PARKER LETTERS
PETRA SCOTESE COLOR
BOB HARRAS EDITOR
JIM SHOOTER EDITOR IN CHIEF
"I SWEAR NOT BY THE MOON, TH' INCONSTANT MOON THAT MONTHLY CHANGES IN HER CIRCLED ORB LEST THAT THY LOVE PROVE LIKEWISE VARIABLE."
Romeo and Juliet ACT II, SCENE II
"I SWEAR TO YOU, NO MATTER HOW LONG IT TAKES, WE WILL GET THE HULK. I SWEAR IT."
INCONSTANT MOON

WHEN you talk about long and impressive runs on US comics, you tend to think of Jack Kirby and Stan Lee's 100-odd issues of Fantastic Four, or Chris Claremont's 18 years on the X-Men or even Robert Kanigher's 20 year tenure on DC's Wonder Woman. But what about Peter David's almost 10 year run on The Incredible Hulk? This former sales manager for Marvel took on one of the most formidable jobs in comics – turning a one-trick pony into a multi-faceted comic series with a lead character that was hardly recognisable from those Tales to Astonish "Hulk Smash!" days...Borderline's Phil Hall takes a look, with the aid of the writer, at one of the most groundbreaking projects Marvel has ever been involved in...



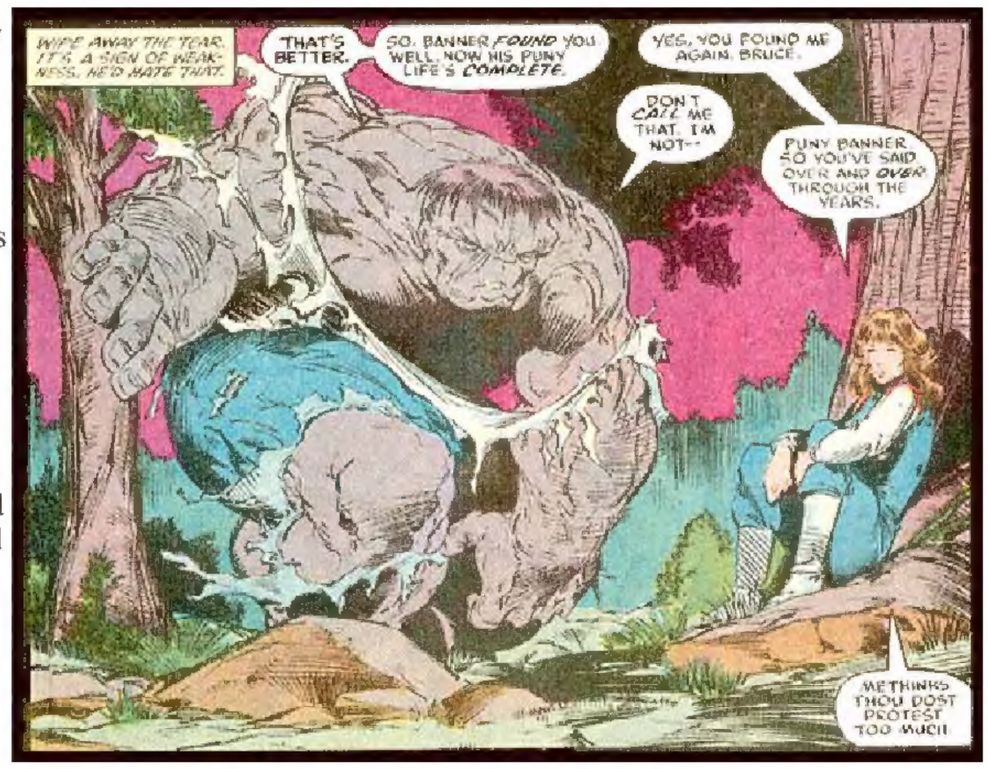
FOR those of you who have been living under rocks for the last 40 years, the Incredible Hulk, aka Robert Bruce Banner, was a creation of Jack Kirby and Stan Lee, was originally supposed to be grey and, because of a printing cock-up, ended up green. The character was Marvel's first flop, lasting only 6 issues before entering into the now famous Marvel Comics Limbo. However, by the mid-1970s he was Marvel's most marketable character, with two comics (plus a starring role in **The Defenders**), a TV series and an iconic presence in the real world.

However, even as a dedicated Hulk fan I can honestly say that there'd been only about a dozen decent issues since the series' revival in **Tales to Astonish** #60. The character was synonymous with boring repetition. Until Peter

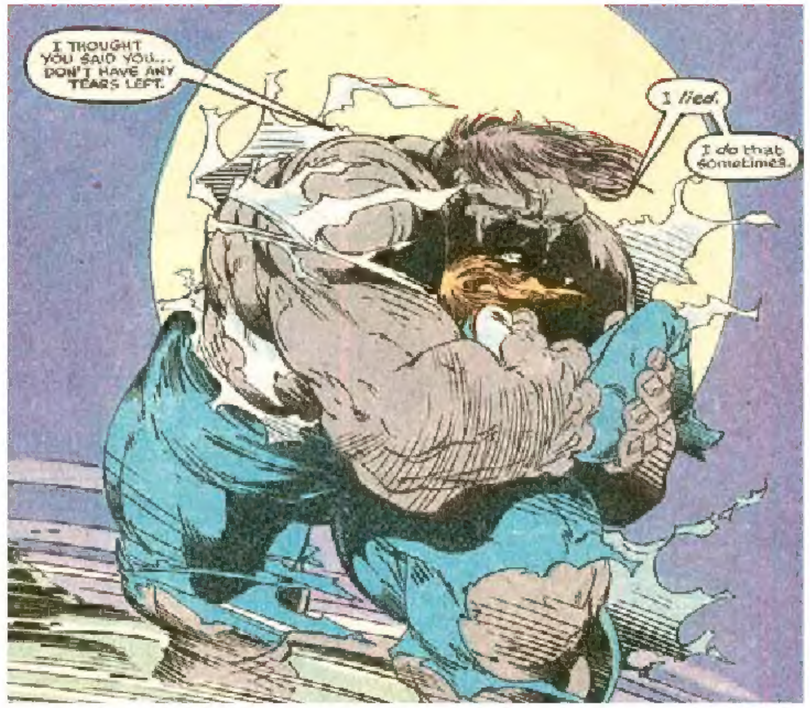
David took over the scripting chores with **Incredible Hulk** #331…

There appears to be a school of thought that believes that comics in the USA, especially those presently being produced by Marvel, are hitting heights never achieved before. This is, of course, a load of balls. What we are witnessing is an old kind of Marvel hype machine, not dissimilar to the one that Stan Lee wheeled out on an unsuspecting comics public in the early 1960s. I'm fairly sure there are some blindingly good comics being produced by Marvel in 2002, but this is probably true of any era since comics began, for someone. Apparently, Bruce Jones is doing something special with **The Hulk**; we've heard that one before...

There was a time, at the back end of the Eighties, when John Byrne's arrival as "visionary" on **The Incredible Hulk** was treated with glee by fans of the Green Goliath - perhaps Byrne could breathe new life into a character that a succession of writers had spent years attempting to revitalise? Sales were lousy - something drastic needed to happen. Byrne lasted less than 6 months; one of Marvel's flagship titles was still in freefall and Al Milgrom found himself trying to tie up loose plot lines without any real idea of who might be Byrne's long-term replacement. Then along came a guy whose biggest claim to fame was writing a critically acclaimed "New Universe" title, who was doing some interesting things with Spider-Man and who had worked in Marvel's sales department.


WIPE AWAY THE TEAR. IT'S A SIGN OF WEAKNESS. HE'D HATE THAT.
THAT'S BETTER.
SO, BANNER FOUND YOU WELL, NOW HIS PUNY LIFE'S COMPLETE.
YES, YOU FOUND ME AGAIN, BRUCE.
DON'T CALL ME THAT. I'M NOT--
PUNY BANNER. SO YOU'VE SAID OVER AND OVER THROUGH THE YEARS.
METHINKS THOU DOST PROTEST TOO MUCH!

However, there are no magical stories about how he got the job: "I've no clue as to the specifics of Al's hiring, but I never pitched for the series", said David. "No, quite simply, I was sitting in my office as Direct Sales Manager at Marvel Comics, Bob Harras came in, sat down, and asked me if I wanted to write the Hulk. Milgrom was leaving the title, no-one else wanted to write the series (although Ralph Macchio was grudgingly prepared to if no one else would, so Bob claimed) and Bob apparently liked my work on Spider-Man enough to ask me if I wanted to take on the Hulk. My immediate instinct was to say no, but I thought about it overnight, considered directions I would take the character, and told him the next day that I'd take on the assignment."



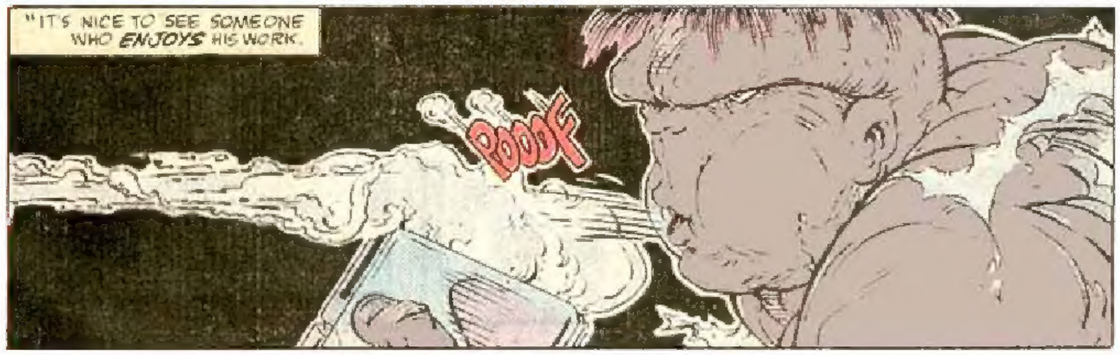
Pushing the envelope

Todd McFarlane preceded Peter David as part of the creative team on **The Hulk**. The creator of **Spawn** (who arguably wouldn't have been as successful if it hadn't been for Old Greenskin) was on board for Milgrom's finale, which tied up as many dangling plot threads as possible, but not all. When David arrived he spent three issues cleaning up the mess then quickly got into his stride. When he took over, Bruce Banner was monster-free and Rick Jones had become a hip and trendy new-look Hulk. It was as corny as it sounds and David quickly reverted Jones to his former sidekick status and recreated The Leader - Hulk's nemesis - in the process. Racked with guilt over causing Rick to become the monster he had striven most of his adult life to be rid of, Banner returns to his secret hideout from his earliest days as the Hulk and exposes himself to gamma rays again. But instead of transforming himself into an unstoppable ball of green fury, he emerged as the smaller, more Frankenstein monster-like, grey Hulk (the one that appeared in the first issue of **The Hulk** and had never been seen since). Borrowing another idea from the early days, David made the Hulk a nocturnal creature, only coming out at night and therefore allowing Banner to function normally during the day.

David talked about his early teaming with McFarlane, a relationship that turned sour a few years later when the artist left Marvel to co-create Image

Comics: "The only thing we really talked about was that I asked Todd what sort of things he'd like to draw. He said he enjoyed drawing giant robots and heavy-duty machinery, so I wrote stuff like that in wherever I could. He was also very hot to draw Wolverine. I had to jump through all kinds of hoops with the X-office in order to arrange that since they were being *very* proprietary of Wolverine at the time, but I managed to guest star him. I hated to see [McFarlane] leave because his artwork seemed to be improving in quantum leaps from one issue to the next, but I fully understood why he was going: the chance to jump to Spider-Man, Marvel's flagship character, was a terrific opportunity for him. Although he did come up to me the following year at San Diego and tell me that, as smart a career move as taking on Spidey was, he really missed the plots I wrote for him during **Hulk**.

"Interestingly and ironically, sales on the book only started to turn around significantly after Todd had already left. At the point where word started getting around to the degree that sales went up, he was gone. As for [our] "falling out", quite simply, I criticized Image in my column, and Todd apparently believes that if you're not 100% with him, then you're 100% against him."



The new Hulk was like a cross between the original Kirby and Lee creation and the "thug" that appeared in the final issue of his first series; the one drawn (and probably written) by Steve Ditko. What this Hulk lacked in strength he made up for with attitude and guile. David took the concept of the squat, ugly Ditko Hulk with the sneer and made him a true anti-hero within the space of six issues. The Hulk talked like a tough guy, acted like a cross between a wild animal and a hardened criminal and while he was still fundamentally doing some good, there was an evil glint in his eye - an unpredictability that made the reader nervous, wondering "just how far will Marvel let Peter David take this?". And that was after just eight issues…

By the time Wolverine appeared in #340 and McFarlane had started inking his own pencils, we had a completely different kettle of fish from any previous Hulk incarnation. David began to examine what made the Hulk tick, not just physically, but mentally and metaphysically. In his battle with the Hulk, Wolverine likens the grey bruiser to cancerous tissue, which in truth is what the Hulk is - a huge walking cancer, capable of doing enormous destruction to anything it comes into contact with… including family and friends.

If you need an example of why the Hulk had suddenly been catapulted onto the must read lists, then issues #340 to #345 will give it to you. The US Government had stockpiled thousands of gamma bombs - the same kind of bomb that caused Banner to be transformed into the Hulk. Clay Quartermain (a rogue S.H.I.E.L.D. agent), Rick Jones, and Bruce Banner managed to convince the Hulk, through a series of bribes, compromises and emotional blackmail, to aid them in their quest to find the gamma bombs and stop the government from using them. At the same time, the new/improved Leader, with a very similar agenda to our heroes, was also closing in on the gamma bomb store. Interspersed with this main plot was the reuniting of Betty (who had married Bruce in the short-lived Byrne run) with her new husband and the ultimate confrontation between wife and hubby's grey-skinned alter ego. This resulted in one of the most memorable Hulk issues of all time, as David says himself: "The issue where the Hulk is cradling Betty in his arms is one of my favorites." It also gave the reader an indication of stories to come a lot further down the line.

That storyline concluded with over 5,000 people being massacred by a heartless,

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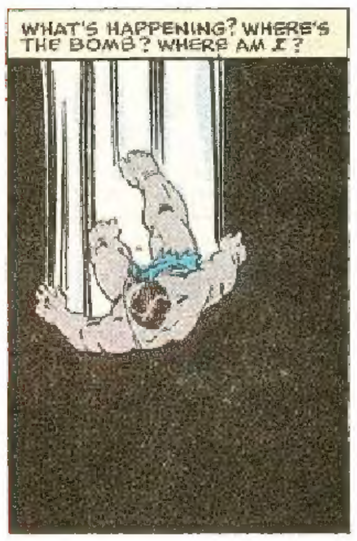


psychopathic Leader, and what appeared to be the destruction of the Hulk. It really did look as though David had written himself into a corner.

The Las Vegas years

As far as tumultuous storylines go, the *Gamma Bomb Saga* was pretty major and it showed that Peter David could write engrossing and realistic stories with some pretty unrealistic and at times stereotypical characters. He had also laid waste to the misconception that you couldn't do anything different with the Hulk. He'd managed it just by putting some smart (and I don't necessarily mean intelligent) words in the monster's mouth.

That storyline had essentially made many of the central characters of the Hulk's history fundamental to the new-look series - Bruce Banner/Hulk, Betty Banner, Rick Jones, Doc Samson, and The Leader. However, when "normal" service was resumed with #347, everything was different. Six months had passed since the death of 5,000 inhabitants of Middletown, USA and the presumed demise of Bruce Banner. The setting was no longer a road trip with Bruce, Rick and Clay; it was now a casino in Las Vegas, Nevada and the pace and tone of the comic had changed completely.

Instead of the detailed and dynamic artwork of Todd McFarlane, the reader was treated to the erratic stylings of Jeff Purves. David takes up the story: "Jeff came from the animation industry and, to the best of my knowledge, is back there. His artwork was indeed a change of pace and, as I noted, outsold McFarlane's run (with the exception of the sales spike from Todd's Wolverine issue). I don't know that the Vegas storyline was ever really Jeff's cuppa." Purves had to draw the adventures of Marvel's biggest solo hero as a suited heavy for a casino owner of possibly dubious connections. There were supervillains, but for most of the two-year storyline it was about Joe Fixit (the persona the Hulk took on) and his cushy life. A new cast of supporting characters was introduced, including Mike Berengetti - Fixit's boss - and Marlo Chandler, a six-foot plus brunette with whom the Hulk had a relationship. But it was the few issues where Purves got to take the Hulk out of Nevada that made him happy.

"The issues that he was a complete standout on were the Jarella's World story. The energy and enthusiasm of those issues was a marked change from before and after. Jeff told me that if we could have done a year-long arc in Jarella's world, he'd have been a happy camper." This was more than obvious, but a lot of Purves' limitations were exposed by a series of inkers who didn't

Click on Globe returns to contents

Marvel characters must remain eternally young, and if Bruce and Betty had a child, that would make them parents and the "enemy" as it were, less identifiable to kid readers. I very nearly quit the book at that point, when it was dictated that she had to miscarry. I wound up not doing so, but I made it clear that I would not write the miscarriage story, and so Harras (who was no longer the editor on the series; Bobbie Chase was) wrote the story himself". This was one of only two issues that David didn't write between #331 and #467.

Despite David's assertion that this change to his plans didn't affect his writing, the issues following that Harras fill-in seemed limp and unfocussed. Purves, now inked by veteran **Hulk** artist/inker Marie Severin, also seemed to be going through the motions. However, David refutes this suggestion: "Y'know what I've noticed? If fans don't like the artwork in a series, they conclude that the writer must not be doing a good job. Seriously. I remember when one fan who didn't like Ariel Olivetti's art for **The Last Avengers Story** told me in all seriousness, 'I really liked the story when you ran it in your column in **Comic Buyers Guide**, but now that I've read it in comic form, I realized it wasn't that good a story to begin with.' No, I wasn't treading water or waiting to be let out of anything. I was doing the best job I could, as always."

enhance him at all. When Marvel hooked him up with Terry Austin or Bob Wiacek you could see why Purves got the gig. Yet despite sales on the book increasing throughout the animation man's tenure, fans weren't really warming to him.

There was also a dangling subplot that David had been told he had to clear up. Of the many dramatic plot twists David introduced during the *Gamma Bomb* storyline, the most controversial was Betty's pregnancy. He had plans, but the company had others. "After it had already started, it was decreed by The Powers That Be that Betty couldn't have the child. The reasoning was that

The personalities clash

The *Countdown* arc saw the beginning of a year-long period when **The Incredible Hulk** catapulted up the popularity charts. Sales were still rising and something was about to happen. Something that hadn't been seen since John Byrne had taken over as penciller on **Uncanny X-Men** 15 years earlier - fanboy heaven.

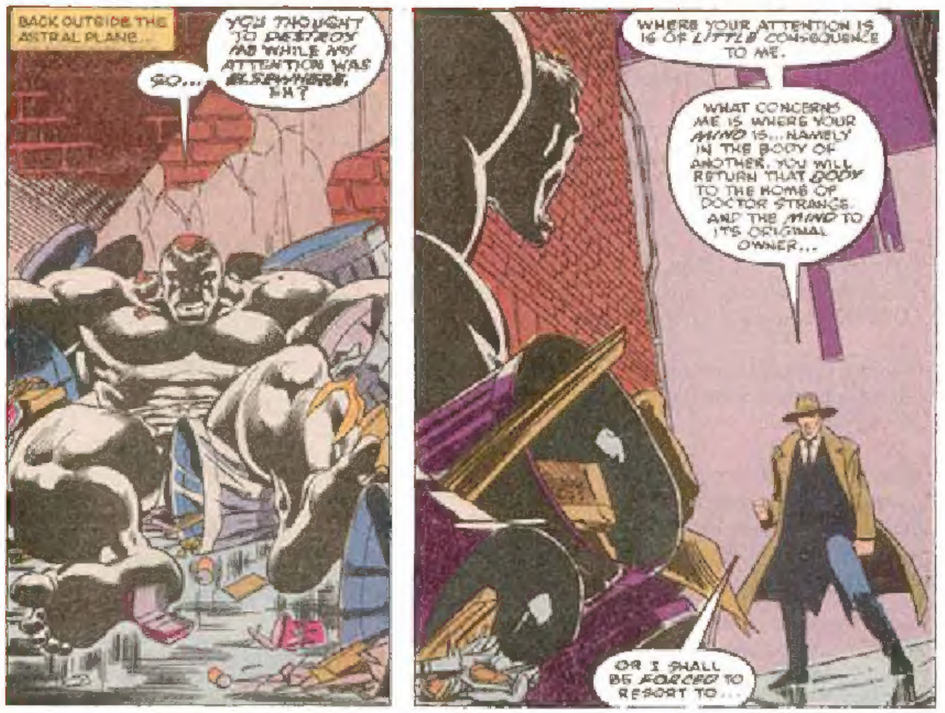
Jeff Purves finished his run with #365 and in the final part of the four-part *Countdown* the reader was introduced to Dale Keown - the former artist on Aircel's **DragonForce** and a star in ascension. He didn't have the most auspicious of beginnings (#367) but when the Canadian artist took over the pencilling chores full-time with #369 the comic suddenly became hip and trendy and people who previously wouldn't have been seen dead holding a Marvel comic, let alone reading one, were praising the book's innovative approach and intelligent, adult writing. There was also the inherent humour that David had introduced throughout the book – all the cast members could have had slots at a comedy club. But for die-hard Marvel fans the most important thing was that for the first time in two years there was an artist the fans liked. "I was very impressed by Dale's art. Dale was (and is, I think) far more versatile than McFarlane; he

was pretty much game to draw anything that I threw at him," commented David.

Keown's arrival also saw the story switch up a gear. Bruce Banner, having spent six months trapped inside the Hulk, was back sharing his existence with the grey Hulk. He had also dragged the Hulk away from Nevada and the desert and back in search of Betty. However, when Bruce Banner returned he brought along someone else - a character this comic hadn't seen since before Peter David's arrival. Within four months ol' Greenskin came back.

In an attempt to find his estranged wife, Banner and the Hulk travel across the country as quickly as they can. In pursuit is the mysterious Prometheus, who works for an (humanitarian) organisation called The Pantheon. Eventually, the Hulk hooks up with former Defenders team mates Namor the Sub-Mariner and Dr Strange before finally tracking Betty down to a monastery. However Prometheus temporarily prevents Bruce from being reunited with Betty and the anguish, anxiety and pain Banner feels brings the old green "Hulk Smash!" persona screaming back to the surface.

Within a couple of months Rick Jones, Doc Samson and the old


BACK OUTSIDE THE ASTRAL PLANE...
YOU THOUGHT TO DESTROY ME WHILE MY ATTENTION WAS ELSEWHERE, EH?
SO...
WHERE YOUR ATTENTION IS IS OF LITTLE CONSEQUENCE TO ME.
WHAT CONCERNS ME IS WHERE YOUR MIND IS...NAMELY IN THE BODY OF ANOTHER. YOU WILL RETURN THAT BODY TO THE HOME OF DOCTOR STRANGE... AND THE MIND TO ITS ORIGINAL OWNER...
OR I SHALL BE FORCED TO RESORT TO...
...FISTICUFFS.

friends from the Army had rejoined the cast, just in time to see Banner's multiple personality disorder become fully realised. The Hulk was moving towards some kind of internal confrontation, something David had planned from the very beginning of his run. "I knew I'd eventually have the Hulk merge. I knew that eventually I'd have him take over a sort of super think tank (which evolved into The Pantheon). But the details of how I was going to get there were very fluid."

The Incredible Bruce

Peter David's achievements on this comic outshone those of some of the most successful artists in recent comics' history – Todd McFarlane, Gary Frank, Liam McCormack-Sharp, Mike Deodato Jr, Adam Kubert, Angel Medina - all of whom shared centre stage with him.

It seems to be universally agreed that David's best era was his pairing with Dale Keown and that the reunification of Banner's multiple personalities was one of the strongest periods of his nine-year run. However, from a critical point of view it was also the beginning of the end. When the mystery no longer remains either something else of equal importance has to be introduced "plot-wise" or the popularity will wither and die. That is not a comics analogy, it is a TV one - but it best describes the relationship between Clark Kent (Superman) and Lois Lane; once the secrets are revealed and the story moves on to the characters' interpersonal relationship, something happens to the dynamics of the story and the readers' interest wanes. This isn't something that can be disregarded as a result of the fans not being interested in the artist; sometimes it's because the writer is no longer capable of producing the desired product. Sometimes the writer has told his story and all he can do is retell it again and again, and that's exactly what happened in the **Incredible Hulk**...

But it didn't happen for a while and arguably Peter David wasn't at fault.

After Dale Keown came Gary Frank, and a new era for the Hulk, now leading The Pantheon. David was building relationships, forging friendships and writing some genuinely fun comics, but a lot of this was down to specifics. "Look, it's real simple: when I was off writing **Hulk** in my own little corner of the Marvel Universe and everyone left me alone, sales were great and people loved the stories. When I was having crossover after crossover thrust upon me, sales dropped and people disliked the stories. You take it from there..." While there was nothing Earth-shattering in terms of continuity during Gary Frank's run, David believed that the British artist, along with Keown, played a big role in the comic's development. "Those [Keown issues] and the issues that Gary Frank drew - when you're working with artists who really elevate the story, it gets you fired up and also enables you to write whatever occurs to you, rather than having to second guess and say, 'Wait, but will this artist be able to pull it off?'"

The difference in the two artists' approaches also had bearings on the overall story: "Dale was stronger at conveying fight scenes while Gary was superior at rendering emotional moments. So I cut back on battle sequences a bit and emphasized dialogue and characterization even more."

David soon discovered how his little analogy about leaving the Hulk to his own corner of the Marvel Universe was going to prove to be very true. The Hulk was now a popular character, his

HULK! BREAK OUT! DON'T LOSE CONSCIOUSNESS, OR YOU'LL REVERT BACK TO ME!
WHAT'D YOU EXPECT, BANNER? LETTING THAT BRAINLESS FOOL OUT. THE TWO OF YOU COMBINED CAN'T EVEN BEGIN TO TOP ME!

title Marvel's best selling comic outside of the X-books and Spider-Man series. They couldn't persuade David to write more comics about the Hulk, so they unsubtly folded the character back into the Marvel Universe with no regard for all of the hard work that had gone into (re)creating him.

The stinking/shrinking Marvel Universe

Probably the last thing the writer of a successful series, with a distinct direction, needs is for the

editors and publishers to insist on a multitude of crossovers with other characters and comics to boost sales. Especially when it was becoming painfully obvious that multi-title crossovers were a huge turn-off for the paying fans. David had managed to use Marvel events such as *Infinity Gauntlet* to craft interesting morality plays, but with Marvel going crossover crazy in the mid 1990s, it was impossible for a writer to stick to a plan: "I wasn't writing a series so much as doing damage control," the writer told me.

David did manage to plant a major twist in the life of the new-look Hulk before crossovers and a succession of ill-equipped artists knocked the train off its rails. It had been clear from the outset of his "reunification" that something wasn't quite right with Bruce; after the fall of The Pantheon, he discovered that fate had dealt him an ironic blow. Where the savage Hulk would get stronger the angrier he became, at times of great stress the new Hulk transformed into puny weakling Bruce Banner, but with the savage Hulk's brain - a potentially life threatening and darkly humorous situation. But Gary Frank left and problems quickly multiplied.

Peter David had previously worked with an artist who he had later fallen out with - big time. He had worked with a guy who went from prolific artist to rock guitarist as soon as he'd made enough money, and he'd worked with other artists who either went on to bigger and better things or disappeared back into obscurity. On the eve of a time when most of his Hulk scripts would need to be written with every other Marvel comic taken into consideration, Peter David was teamed with "the next big thing", and it wasn't nice…

Liam McCormack-Sharp, like Gary Frank, had made his name working for Marvel UK. In fact, Sharp was probably better known to the US comics fans - he was the artist on **Death's Head II**, which had been a minor hit in the States for Marvel's UK subsidiary. The damage the UK artist caused can probably, with hindsight, be seen as the reason **The Incredible Hulk** started to become mediocre again.

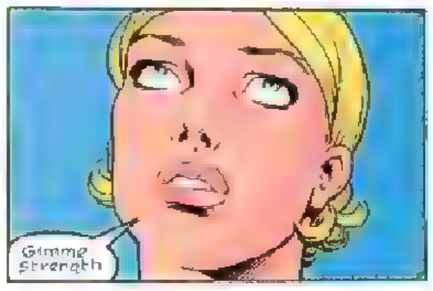
I had suggested to David that Sharp had "casually ignored his scripts" - the writer was a little more forthright. "Liam didn't casually ignore my scripts; he actively hated my scripts. He hated drawing cars (problematic, considering that the Hulk was working in a service station at the time) and buildings. He begged me to do a storyline set in space, but we had just *done* a storyline set in space months earlier. He's a very strong artist, but was on the wrong book at the wrong time. Finally he lobbied Bobbie Chase to have me removed from the series, writing a letter to her stating that he felt he had a lot he could bring to the book, but obviously my stories just weren't working for him, and something (i.e., firing me) was going to have to be done. I was in the office when his letter came in; Bobbie read it to me with incredulity in her voice and then took Liam off the title". As a fan and reviewer I felt the book had hit a low point, yet David wasn't blameless. The *Fall of The Pantheon* storyline was as major a plot as the *Gamma Bomb Saga* and what was needed was a change of pace. This time, instead of sending the Hulk to Las Vegas, the writer took Betty and Bruce to the Deep South and had the two of them trying to live as normal a life as they could. Of course, even in a small Florida town this couldn't happen because before too long Bruce was facing super-powered sheriffs, old Hulk villains (Speedfreak, the Abomination) and the Man-Thing. It might have worked once, but it wasn't going

RICK! HOLD ON, KID!
EXIT
WAIT! WE WANT TO KEEP TALKING TO YOU!
LATER, LADY.
WE MEAN IT! DON'T GO OUT THERE! I'M WARNING YOU--!
YOU'RE WARNING ME?

Click on Globe returns to contents

to work again. Repetition had set in…

After Sharp was removed from the book there was a feeling of anticipation with the news that Angel Medina was joining the creative team. He had worked with David on **Dreadstar** and his arrival was hopefully going to bring stability back to the title. But it didn't work, and even though the storyline on which they worked was supposed to have been one of the most dramatic in David's tenure, it fell flat. "I'm not sure what happened with Angel. I think he's a brilliant artist; his work on **Dreadstar** was superb, and I was an active lobbyist for him on the title. And I thought he started off great on **Incredible Hulk**. But his work on the title didn't hold up as the issues passed. Maybe he was having personal problems, maybe he just didn't like the stories, I dunno. I only knew at the time that he was capable of far better than we were seeing from him."



Next came Brazilian Mike Deodato Jr. "Mike wasn't intended as a long-term replacement, as I recall. I was bummed at the way those stories looked visually, because I'd worked with him on the **Hulk vs. Hercules** one-shot and loved his art there. But I think we were seeing the Mike Deodato "studio" during his run on Hulk, and it showed. Lately Mike's gone back to doing his art himself, and the difference in quality is staggering." Another thing that didn't help the Deodato run on the title was the arrival of Marvel's own version of DC Comics' **Crisis on Infinite Earths**. *Onslaught* and all the crossover flotsam that was generated before and after it was a problem that even the best authors in the world would have had problems keeping tabs on. It was clear that the Hulk's direction had been taken away from David and the Hulk's new characteristics had been thrust on the writer rather than him allowing his story to move that way. The comic became very difficult to read.

In the years between then and Peter David's eventual departure, probably less happened than in the few years between the writer's arrival and the much-lauded **Incredible Hulk** #377. So many of the subplots were washed away, because of Marvel's insistence that the Hulk should remain a fundamental part of its whole cache of largely lifeless characters.

By the time David was left alone he was in his final few

months on the title. When he was teamed up with Adam Kubert it seemed he had found another great artist to tell tales with, but Kubert's work was never as good as the reader had hoped. Artists like McFarlane, Keown and Frank had spoiled us and only someone innovative was enough to satiate the needs of die-hard Hulk fans. But that wasn't as important as getting the comic finally back on track.

During one of the least memorable periods of David's run on the title, a character that would come to have a big role in the Hulk's life makes the astute observation that despite the Hulk's insisting he just wants to be left alone, that is in fact the last thing he wants. This becomes something of a lynch pin for the last six months of David's run. Although David had no inkling that his time was at an end on the title, you might with hindsight believe differently. We had gone full circle – when Peter David took over the writing chores on the title nearly ten years earlier the assembled cast of characters included Bruce and Betty Banner, General "Thunderbolt" Ross, Doctor Leonard Samson, Rick Jones, the US Army and a team of specially prepared "Hulkbusters". With **Incredible Hulk** #462 we were back with almost the same set up, except that this time, instead of using force, these Hulkbusters used psychology.

While the Hulk that roamed these pages was closer to the Hulk that the majority of the world would have recognised, or more to the point, the Hulk that will be immortalised in Ang Lee's film in 2003, there also seemed to be a purpose and fixed direction about the stories again. It was as if David had to go back to the beginning again before he could take the character in a completely different direction. One of the things that made his early run stand out above the other well-produced comics of that era was the sense of expecting the unexpected. Peter David took just about every Hulk cliché in the book and busted it. His dialogue was realistic (if a little too double-entendre laden at times), humorous and fast-paced. It was never a comfortable ride and many of the stories left the reader with a sense of unease – not unexpected when you're dealing with the dark side of a tortured and abused soul, but that had never before been handled with such frankness.

Epitaphs are easy

The feeling that he was developing something was lost in those last few years. I genuinely think now that despite the outside influences on Peter David's work, he probably should have left the title when he disbanded the Pantheon, but he was at that time barely more than halfway through his stay. I refute David's statement that if the artist doesn't live up to expectations then the writer tends to get the blame for a bad script. I think if a writer and an artist work well together you get the best results and if one of the team isn't pulling his or her weight then it is reflected in all the key creators' work. One of the reasons that the Hulk worked for me and for many others was because it was a great union of creative minds working on something that had never been anything more than written-by-rote comics.

Despite Adam Kubert having worked on the title for 12 months, it wasn't until their final few months together that the reader saw that creative spark appear for

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Kubert and David, and reappear for the comic. Between issues #462 and #465 it was like the old days - the story was going along at a blistering pace, the artwork was top notch and the unexpected had returned… Except there was to be one final twist of fate.

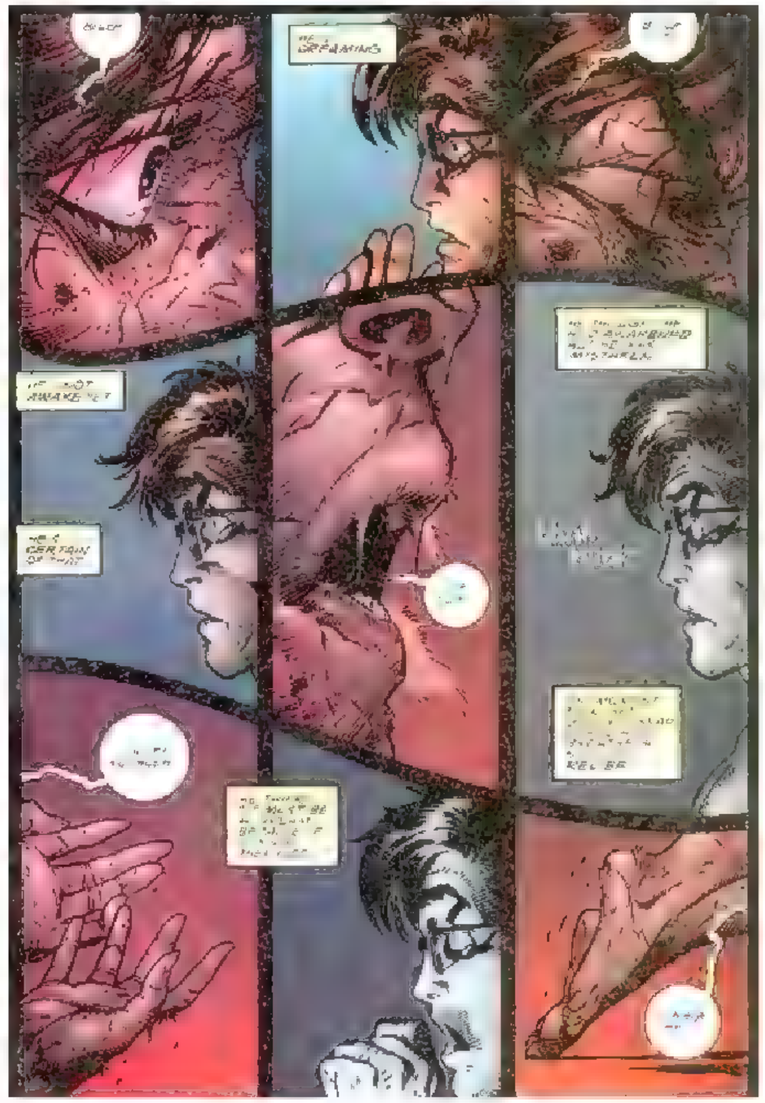
"I had been discussing overall directions for the title with Bobbie Chase," said David. "And she was the one who suggested we kill off Betty. I saw the dramatic possibilities, and wrote Hulk #466 with the belief that I was staying on the title. I thought I was going to write a lengthy story arc exploring how Bruce would cope and react when the one thing anchoring his sanity was taken from him. There'd be a lot of dramatic possibilities, I thought. But then Bobbie was told by the Powers That Be that they wanted to use Betty's death as an excuse to have the Hulk turn into a mindless unspeaking rampaging engine of destruction for 22 pages every month. That was what the book would be. Hulk smash. People try to stop him. Hulk smashes some more. I told them that was a disastrous move and I wouldn't write that. Their response was, 'Fine. Then #467 is your last issue. Buh bye.' Bobbie was in tears when she conveyed their decision. I've said before, I'll say it again: Had I known that was what was going to happen, I would *never* have killed off Betty."

There was extra irony in the fact that Peter David's firing generated 10 times the column inches that Betty Banner's death received. In fact, the death of one of Marvel's oldest supporting characters almost went unnoticed on the comics radar, even though that issue and David's subsequent epilogue in #467 were two of the most poignant and touching books Peter David could have wished to have written.

The comics press speculated on whether or not the writer's shoes could be filled; whether whoever came on to write it would forever be faced with living in the shadow of the man who transformed the Hulk. There is plenty of talk about the Hulk at the moment. Comics veteran Bruce Jones has been writing the title for over a year now and the general feeling is that he's writing the Hulk TV series with a little more sophistication and a touch more SF. But he's still writing about a big green ball of fury; he could write the Hulk in any way he wanted, but he'd still end up being compared to Peter David.

I asked Peter David what he would have done had he not been fired, "Read #467. It's all there.

Curiously, if you see the way I wrote Banner in that last sequence, you'll see he's pretty much the way Bruce Jones is writing him now." See?



The glacial ice crackles in protest beneath my tread. But, as is often the case when it comes to the Incredible Hulk,
the protests are muted.

A QUESTION OF GREEN

A few questions I asked Peter David during our interview didn't really fit into the main text, but the answers were interesting enough for me to want to share them with the rest of you.

AND HE TURNED TO ME AND LOOKED ME RIGHT IN THE EYES AND HIS EYES GLOWED GREEN IN THE DARKNESS OF THE ROOM AND HE SAID
SOMETIMES I GET TO SHOT ON

BL: How did you feel, working with Dale Keown on the Hulk again after all these years?
PAD: I wrote The End as a short story back when I was still on the title. So working with Dale on the graphic novel was a kind of bonus. Curiously, the most fun has been watching the perplexed faces of retailers as it blew out of the store.

There was more stuff I wanted to do with The Pantheon. I don't know that I'll ever have the chance to do so.

BL: Wild Man: didn't do it for me, yet he was sort of hyped by The Maestro into being something completely different. He seemed more like an homage to Mike Allred's Madman *than a seriously important Hulk foe. What was the score with him?*
PAD: Keep in mind you were seeing him in his "first stage". There was more I was going to be doing with him, building him up and making him even more dangerous. He was intended as a recurring character. Kind of hard to do, though, when the book goes away.

BL: Apparently you've been tying up some of the ideas from Incredible Hulk in Captain Marvel – are there any reasons why Hulk fans should be reading this book?
PAD: I would have thought that the combination of Rick Jones' presence, my writing it, and the raft of positive reviews it's gotten would be enough. Why should they read it now?

To piss off Bill Jemas.

I DON'T KNOW WHAT POSSESSED ME IT WAS A WASTE OF TIME
I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN HE'D STOP IT. I TRIED TO DO IT WITHOUT WARNING HIM. NOT THINK ABOUT IT, JUST DO IT
I HATE HIM.
HATE PUNY BANNER. TRIED TO KILL HIMSELF

Hulk artists' roll of honour: from the start – Todd McFarlane, Jeff Purves, Dale Keown (1990), Gary Frank, Liam Sharp, Mike Deodato Jr, Adam Kubert, Angel Medina and above Dale Keown (2002). Photos are all of Peter David apart from the last one which is PAD, Leonard Kirk and Robin Riggs – DC's Supergirl team!

Click on Globe returns to contents

NO CAUSE FOR COMPLAINT

Borderline's chief news feature writer Jay Eales has a good reason for revisiting Noble Causes in these pages...

YOU'LL have to forgive us for a little trumpet-blowing, readers, as Image gears up for the release of **Noble Causes: Family Secrets**, the latest storyline of a title we've long championed in the pages of **Borderline** - because it's our first great success story. Way back in November 2001, in issue #4, our *Young Guns* column helped to introduce the wider world to the work of British artist Ian Richardson, known almost exclusively for his work in **2000AD**. In issue #9, the following April, I exhorted readers to check out Jay Faerber's fledgling Image comic, **Noble Causes**. Faerber, among our other readers in the professional community, was obviously paying attention, and as soon as an opportunity arose, he asked us for Richardson's contact details and offered him work.

So forgive us a little self-indulgence; we decided to have another chat with the series' writer and his new artist.

Borderline: Noble Causes began with a one-shot, First Impressions, followed by an ongoing series - but four issues down the line, after the conclusion of the first story arc, you're changing the format to a sequence of limited series, coinciding with the debut of new artist, Ian Richardson. Why the change, Jay?
Jay Faerber: Mainly, we decided to reformat as a series of miniseries as a way to jump-start some more interest in the book. We want people to know that is a spot where they can start reading the book, and they won't be lost. I was toying with the idea of a relaunch when Pat Gleason told me he was taking a gig at DC, so when it became clear that we had to find a new artist, starting the series over seemed like an even better idea. We also wanted to increase the shipping frequency so that each mini-series comes out monthly. So you'll get a complete 4-issue story in four months. Then we'll take a couple months off to get ahead on the next mini, and then we'll solicit it, and you'll get another complete story in four months, and so on and so forth.

BL: Ian: Your work for 2000AD has all been done with you as sole artist, whereas with Noble Causes you'll be inked by John Wycough. What's your preferred method of working?
Ian Richardson: Strangely enough, I actually like both methods, but for different reasons. On 2000AD I get to be responsible for the whole thing, so it's only as good as I can make it. I like that element of control to it. On Noble Causes I get to take part in more of a teamwork scenario, so that collaborative process adds something new to the pages. Plus I get to, perhaps, spend a little more time on the pencils so they can seem a little fresher.

BL: Michael Avon Oeming is going to be doing covers for Noble Causes: Family Secrets. Yet you're continuing with variant covers. Why's that?
JF: Mainly, because I like variant covers. I like seeing different artists' interpretations of my characters. The thing about variants, though, is that some people think we produce them with the expectation that fans must buy both. I want to go on the record and say that that's ridiculous. I want

fans to buy whichever cover they like. I certainly don't expect them to buy both.

I should point out now that the variants for Noble Causes: Family Secrets are: Cory (Superpatriot) Walker on #1, Steve Lieber on #2, Jim Valentino on #3, and Phil Hester on #4.

IR: Like Jay said, it's cool to see the different representations of the family. Plus, if the variants bring someone to pick up the book who might have passed it by, that's got to be worthwhile. I've seen the variants as well as the Oeming covers and they'd all make me want to check out the book.

BL: One of the strengths of Noble Causes is the dual story format, with a lead story set in the present, and a back-up delving into the past of the characters, adding depth to their world from the first issue. That's continuing with the new format, isn't it? Can you name any of the new back-up artists yet?

JF: Yep, we'll still have the 15-page lead story and the 8-page back-up, every issue. We initially did it to ease the burden on our lead artist, but the format's been incredibly well-received, and I've started using the back-up slots to spotlight new artists. So the first issue features a guy named Jonboy Meyers. He's done a little work for [comics publisher] Funkotron in the past, but this is his first big break, and he's got a real fun style.

Issue #2 is by Matt Wendt, who hasn't really done anything before. He's a good friend of former NC artist Pat Gleason, and he got the gig after showing me a 3-page sequence he'd done for fun that featured Frost fighting Optimus Prime. Yes, you read that correctly. It was absurd, but really fun, so I gave him the back-up to #2.

Issue #3's back-up is by Jon Sommariva, a really promising Australian artist, who's done some small press "down under," but again, this will be his first big break. Since landing his NC gig, though, he's been asked to do a back-up story in Savage Dragon, so I guess I'm not the only one who likes his stuff.

And issue #4 is by Andres Ponce, an artist from Argentina. He's been doing backgrounds and assists on some Dark Horse books, but this is his first full-fledged pencilling and inking assignment. He actually found me - he sent me samples, asking to do a back-up, and they were so good, I couldn't say "No."

BL: You seem to have managed to avoid the "Who Killed Laura Palmer" factor which led to the downfall of Twin Peaks*. Even though the conclusion of the first story arc reveals the murderer of Race Noble, there're plenty more mysteries to uncover, which I understand Family Secrets will be getting into?*

JF: Oh yeah – Noble Causes: Family Secrets is all about paternity. Everyone's scrambling to figure out who's the father of Zephyr's baby, while Frost silently searches for the name of his own father. The answers to both of those questions will be revealed in this miniseries... sort of.

BL: In other comments you've made, you give the impression that you regret describing Noble Causes as a superhero soap opera. Is that right, and if so, why? And have you come up with a more apt description?

JF: I dunno, I tend to waffle on the subject. I mean, it *is* a soap opera. But I sometimes wonder if hyping it as such turned people off. Because soaps have just as much a stigma to them as comics. You'd think that comics fans, who are so historically criticized for their hobby, would be more accepting of other forms of entertainment, but they're not. They can be just as snobby as the next guy. And as much as I'd like to say otherwise, I'm the same way. I love comics and soap operas, but I think pro wrestling is ridiculous.

IR: What can you do? Like Jay said, when you start attaching the soap opera tag you get the associated stigma about it not being cool. If you start referring to the book as "character driven", that's clichéd. You're damned if you do, you're damned if you don't. You'd like to think you can pique people's interest by just telling them what a damned good read the book is ('cos it is!).

BL: Any development on the prospects for Noble Causes - The TV series*, or do the wheels of television continue to turn slowly?*

JF: It's still moving very, very slowly. I don't even think about it anymore. I just let the Hollywood

people do their thing.

BL: Ian, what's been the most fun part of working on Family Secrets (without giving away any plot points, of course!)? Any favourite character?
IR: I guess the "most" fun part has been finding out what happens in each next issue. I only managed to last until I'd read half of the script for issue #2 until I started to bug Jay for what happens by the time we get to #4!

As far as "favourite character" goes you kinda end up with a soft spot for all the family, because they're all so different from each other. So from an artist's point of view there's all this variety of emotions to cover from just one group of people. At the moment though, I'm particularly enjoying drawing Rusty and Liz. Without giving away too much, Rusty's still going through a lot and perhaps still struggling to cope, then you've got Liz, a little girl lost in the middle of all these dysfunctional weirdos! Plus, those glasses get me hot!

BL: How's the new monthly schedule working out for the book? How far ahead of publication are you?
JF: It's working out well, so far. Issue #1 is completely drawn and lettered, and will be colored by the end of this month. So we're totally on schedule for an October debut. All the back-ups are written and pencilled at this point, and Ian's about halfway done pencilling the lead story in the second issue.

IR: Minor correction to what Jay said; by the time you start compiling this, the pencils for #2 will be finished.

BL: Is there any indication of an order spike for the new miniseries?
JF: We haven't gotten our orders in on the first issue of the new mini yet. Although I am happy to report that issue #2 of the first series has completely sold out, and #4 has halfway sold out (all of the Pat Gleason covers are gone). So this means we're going to start working on putting together a TPB, for release in early 2003.

BL: Can you give us a taster of things to come, storywise?
JF: Well the front-burner story in NC:FS is the public relations nightmare that envelops the family surrounding Zephyr's pregnancy, and just who the baby's father is. That drives most of the series, but we'll also spend some time on Doc's guilt over his part in Race's death, the Rusty/Celeste/Frost triangle, and Liz's continuing efforts to find her place in this crazy family.

BL: What other projects do the two of you have on your slates currently?
JF: Well in addition to NC:FS, I'm dialoguing Xin, a 3-issue series for Harris Comics that debuts in November. It's plotted and drawn by Kevin Lau and it's a retelling of the Chinese monkey king myth, with new sci-fi and fantasy elements stirred in. [*For more details on this series, see Borderline #13*]

Also for Harris, and also in November, I'm doing a 4-issue arc on Vampirella. It's being drawn by Matthew (Felon, Wonder Woman) Clark, and once that wraps up, Ben Raab and I are going to be doing some more work on that book. We had dinner with editor Maureen McTigue in San Diego, and planned out a nice 8-issue arc that we hope will really revitalize the character.

Then in December I'm jumping on the '80s nostalgia bandwagon and scripting WildStorm's new Robotech mini-series. The series is being roughly plotted by Tommy Yune, who wrote and drew [WildStorm's] Speed Racer mini, and is now working as the Creative Director at Harmony Gold, the company that owns the Robotech license. So I'm working from his rough plots on this series, and it's being illustrated by Udon Studios. It lasts five issues, and should be a lot of fun.

Also in December will be The Hat Squad, a b&w 48-page, squarebound one-shot from Moonstone Books. It's being drawn by a new guy named Eric Yonge who's got a great "old school" style that's perfect for this project. The book's about an elite squad of LAPD Detectives who worked high-profile cases in 1950s Hollywood.

And then in January is the debut of Venture, my new creator-owned superhero series at Image. I co-created this one with artist Jamal Igle, and it's an ongoing, full-color monthly series. It's basically a buddy book about the "business venture" between a fame-hungry tabloid reporter and the publicity-shy immortal that he blackmails into becoming a superhero. It's part of Image's new line of superhero books, and we're really psyched about it.

And that's all the stuff I've got coming out... that I can talk about.

IR: Obviously aside from NC:FS, I've just finished another piece for 2000AD called *Red Man Rising*, for their new *Alternity* stuff. [Alternity *is the umbrella title for a series of one-off historical stories, in the vein of* Future Shocks, *where history diverges along different paths such as the old chestnut "What if the Nazis won World War 2?"*]

Also I'm working on a 64-page graphic novel for Platinum Studios for their *Cowboys & Aliens* film project. I've just finished five presentation storyboard-type scenes for them to present to interested studios, so it's back on to the graphic novel now.

Jay and I have briefly talked about doing something else, but as he said, nothing we can talk about just yet.

Noble Causes: Family Secrets #1 (of 4 monthly issues) is due in the shops in the week commencing October 2nd – in full colour, 32-pages long and priced at $2.95.

ALOHA NOIR!

The dangerous and exotic world of crime-drenched 1950s Hawaii features in Hawaiian Dick: Byrd of Paradise, a new three-issue limited series from Image, released in December. Borderline's Mike Sivier discovers that life in the sun can be shady.

ORIGINALLY pitched as a cross between *The X-Files* and *The Rockford Files* in a film noir version of 1950s Hawaii, the series opens in 1953 when Byrd, a former big city detective hiding from his troubles in Hawaii, is recruited to track down a stolen car. During the investigation, Byrd and his partner, detective Mo Kalama, stumble upon a complicated kidnapping plot.

Before the case is solved, the two will have to contend with an eccentric drug lord and his scheming henchmen, the psychic aunt of two island beauties, swank tiki lounges, an exotic bar girl, a high speed chase along the scenic Hawaiian coast, the mysterious Night Marchers of the Pali Highway, and the murdered kidnapping victim, returned from the dead.

Written by B. Clay Moore with artwork by newcomer Steven Griffin (showcased in **Borderline** #13), **Hawaiian Dick** is, claims Image, "a decidedly different type of crime comic, owing more to its writer's personal interests than [to] what is typically expected from the crime genre".

B. Clay Moore says: "I began to develop **Hawaiian Dick** with the notion of tossing all the things I really dig about pop culture into one big mix. That included '50s style and atmosphere, film noir, swank tiki/cocktail culture and, of course, zombies. I then centered on Hawaii in the '50s, and realized the story possibilities were almost endless, once I factored in the rich folklore and mythology of the islands. And how much cooler can it get than 1950s Hawaii?"

He told **Borderline**: "I'm something of a pop culture sponge, and I have a special affinity for the Fifties and the pop culture that's grown out of the decade. So I wanted to take elements of popular culture that people associate with both the '50s and Hawaii, and play around with them a bit."

He added: "I'm also a fan of the whole kitschy tiki culture, and much of that centers on this idealized notion of Hawaii as a tropical paradise. The idea of taking a sort of jazzy film noir approach to this tiki theme was appealing. And tying Hawaiian mythology into the stories seemed a great way to underscore that Hawaii is deeper than a standard travel brochure description, and to add a bit of spooky fun.

"And, of course, downtrodden detectives are a must for successful noir. All of the elements just seemed to fit together."

The historical setting implies some research to get the details right. Why opt for this when it would be easier setting the story in a more familiar timeframe?

"I guess the timeframe is familiar to me in the sense that I'm a fan of the period in

question," said Moore. "Sometimes I get accused of spending more time in the past then I do in the present. There's an evocative appeal to that time and place that wouldn't work if the setting was more contemporary. If I say "Hawaii in the '50s", images immediately spring to mind - stereotypical though they may be. If I say "Burbank in 2002", it loses some of its appeal."

That's as may be - but, what's a swank tiki lounge?

"A cocktail lounge with a tiki theme. Martinis and swizzle sticks. Tiki torches and bamboo bars. America was swimming in tiki culture during the '50s and '60s," Moore elaborates. "People trying to escape the day-to-day, I suppose, even if it only meant driving down the block to Trader Vic's, or popping the latest Martin Denny album into the hi-fi."

Moore initially intended to collaborate with artist J. Bone (**Alison Dare**, **Jingle Belle**, **Spider-Man: Tangled Web**) on the series, but Bone had to bow out due to scheduling conflicts. Within days of putting out the call for a new artist, though, samples from Steven Griffin showed up in Moore's e-mail box. After that, it took only a single-page try-out job for Moore to realize he had encountered a genuinely rare talent.

He proclaimed: "Once people get a look at Steven's artwork, they're going to be blown away. There's nothing quite like it in comics, to my mind. The book became much more interesting when Steven came on board. He's able to capture exactly what I'm looking for and is willing to do the research necessary to absolutely nail the details. I think we really click together, despite the fact that we're roughly half a million miles away from each other."

MO, YOU'RE OUT OF YOUR CAGE EARLY. WORKING OUT OF THE OFFICE TODAY?
HELPING MY OLD ARMY PAL FROM THE STATES, KAHAMI.
FRIEND OF HIS HAD THE FAMILY SEDAN PINCHED OUT ON THE PALI HIGHWAY.
IS HIS FRIEND HAOLE, TOO?
YEP.
HIS FRIEND ANGERED THE MARCHERS, NO DOUBT I'D TELL HIM TO FORGET HIS CAR, AND THANK THE SPIRITS THAT'S ALL THEY TOOK.
MARCHERS...?
MARCHERS DON'T DRIVE BUICKS, KAHAMI.

Griffin lives in Perth, Australia, where he has done extensive work developing websites, flash animation films and online comic strips; Moore is a freelance writer from Kansas City whose previous credits include a stint co-editing **Love in Tights** for Slave Labor Graphics, along with J. Torres (**Jason and the Argobots**, **Alison Dare**, **Sidekicks**).

Moore told **Borderline**: "When it became apparent that J. Bone wasn't going to be able to do the book due to other commitments, I advertised online for an artist. Steven was one of a handful of respondents with any real promise. He showed me a three-page sample of his work, and, to be honest, I wasn't sure his style would work for this story. But I could see that he was talented. On a whim, I asked him to work up a one-page colour strip featuring Byrd, and the results were way beyond what I'd expected, based on the previous sample. Suddenly it became obvious that his style was perfect for the book. He agreed to devote himself to the project at that point, and it's been a pleasure watching him grow right before my eyes. He possesses an innate sense of layout and design that a lot of seasoned pros can't match, and he answers every challenge with immediate results. I can't tell you how lucky I am to have found him."

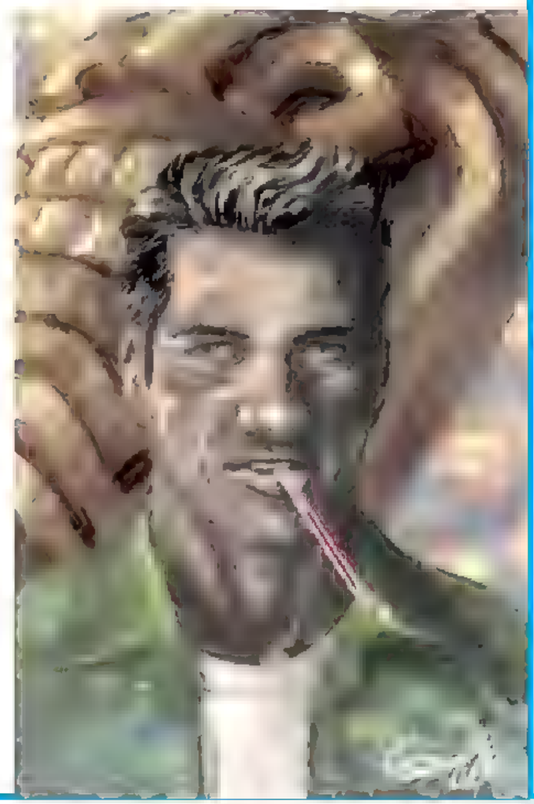
The setup of **Hawaiian Dick** seems like a blueprint for a movie

- or a crime noir pulp novel (zombies excepted) - and it seems this style of packaging informs the thinking behind many comics these days. **Borderline** asked Moore: Are comicbook limited series the new pulp fiction?

"That's a good question," he says. "They could be, if we could figure out how to get them into the hands of people outside of comic shops. With trade paperbacks popping up more and more in bookstores, I suppose they might be headed that way. Really, though, the limited series is just a more economical way to tell a story arc. And I think readers are more willing to commit to three or four issues than to an ongoing series, assuming they know they're going to get a solid story, told start to finish."

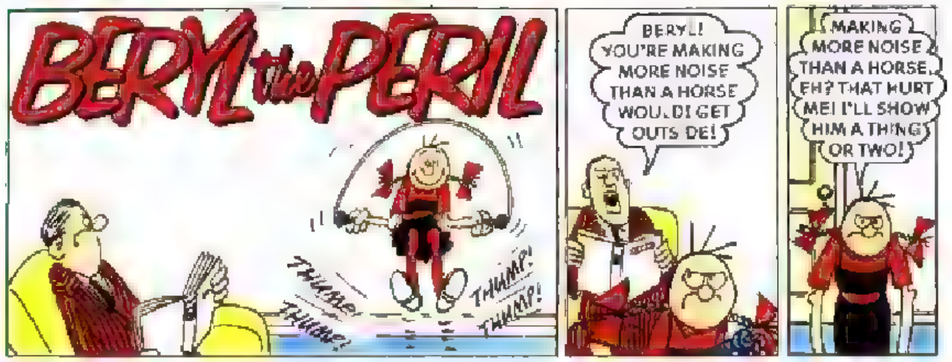
He adds: "I think the best blueprint for what I'd like to do with **Hawaiian Dick** is **Hellboy**. The stories are told in finite arcs, but there's a continuity that runs through the minis. You can enjoy each series on its own merit, but the picture becomes clearer if you read the whole thing."

Hawaiian Dick: Byrd of Paradise *#1 will arrive in stores in December 2002.*



INTERNET SOUL-SEARCHING

You thought David McLintock was hellbent on scouring the Internet for information about veteran American comics artists? This month he turns his attention to Scotland, and one of D.C. Thomson's finest... David Law


BERYL the PERIL
THWAPP!
THWAPP!
THWAPP!
BERYL! YOU'RE MAKING MORE NOISE THAN A HORSE WOULD GET OUTSIDE!
MAKING MORE NOISE THAN A HORSE, EH? THAT HURT ME! I'LL SHOW HIM A THING OR TWO!

YE EDITOR thought he had it sussed - I had embarked on a personal quest to find my Silver Age heroes on the Internet. So it's time that McLintock threw a wobbler into his assumptions and changed tack. All right, you could argue that David Law is a Silver Age hero, as the majority of his best work was done in the 60s, but while Mr Law was, for me, the definitive artist on *Dennis the Menace* (the *real* Dennis, of **The Beano** fame), I ain't seen any of his **Spider-Man** work and as yet his take on **The Fantastic Four** has never been published. Yes, I'm off looking for info on my all time fave **Beano** artist. And **Topper**. And **Dandy**. And **Beezer**. Fave, that is, if I exclude the magnificent Dudley D. Watkins... Law's *Dennis*, his *Beryl the Peril*, and his sublime *Corporal Clott*, crackling with elongated madcap energy, jump off the page with their simplistic lines and a frantic movement that few other cartoonists have captured. Yes, I adore Leo Baxendale (even if he did fall out with me for not liking his website). Of course, Ken Reid, and his legendary *Jonah*, is a superbly creative comic artist. But my fave is Law. So nuts to the rest of you.

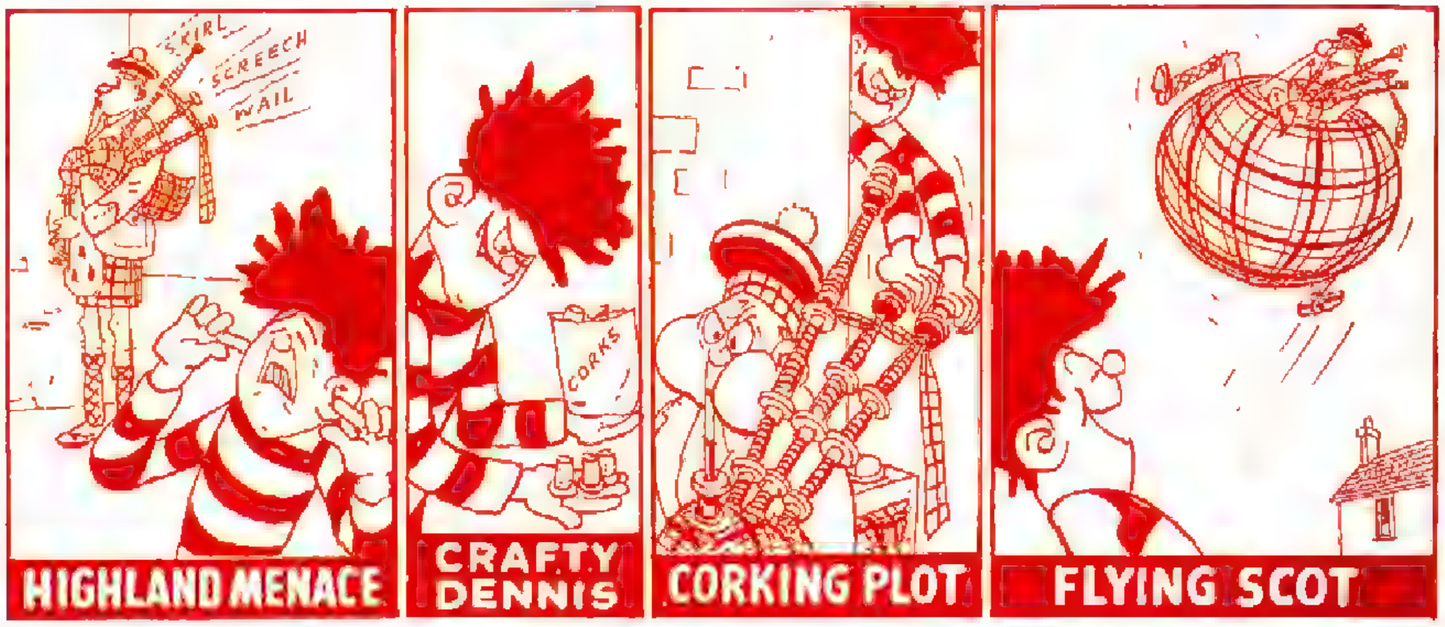
Was finding info on the late Mr Law easy? I'd be lying if I said "yes". It's a scarcely credible fact that when it comes to Internet sites dedicated to British comics and their creators, there's an awful lot of webmastering still to be done. Unbelievably, there's almost bugger all to be found on Dudley D. Watkins, the mega-talent behind *The Broons*, *Oor Wullie*, *Lord Snooty* and *Desperate Dan*, to name just a few. I'm not alone in seeing his clear influence on Frank Quitely. Just where would **Viz** be without lampooning his drawing style? So finding out about any other British comics talent would prove to be a bit of a challenge.

Key in "David+Law" on *www.altavista.com*, and there are 2478 pages found. But David Law is a rather common name. And there are a remarkable number of David Laws who are in fact... lawyers. Most of these are in the US, which is not surprising really given that 65% of the US population are what they charmingly call "attorneys" (which translates into English as "sharks"). But hey, ho, in we plunge to find the actual David Law.

First up, the "Lambiek Comicopedia", which is in fact not some exotic foreign disease, but a series of very basic biographies of comics artists worldwide. The relevant page is *www.lambiek.net/law_david.htm*. Apart from 3 nice wee jpegs, all I could meaningfully glean was that Law died in 1971.

Tired of reading how great "attorney at law" David Law was, I soon switched strategy, moved to other search engines, particularly *www.google.com*, and started to search through Mr Law's creations, namely Dennis the Menace, Beryl the Peril and Corporal Clott. This proved much more fruitful. But the problem of the other Dennis the Menace loomed large. The cheeky little 6 year-old, created by recently deceased American Hank Ketcham, has literally thousands of pages dedicated to him. Now, I love my US strips as much as I love my occasional hot baths, but Ketcham's Dennis is a rather bland, folksy, nonentity when compared to Beanotown's finest. (That's more hate mail coming my way, then). It was *www.wikipedia.com/wiki/Dennis_the_Menace* that revealed the truly astonishing coincidence that **both** Dennises first appeared

CORPORAL CLOTT
I'M GUARDING THE OFFICERS CHRISTMAS PUDDING! HMM! SMASHING SMELL IT HAS!
HI! I WANT SOME OF THAT POO CLOTT!
GOSH! AN AMBUSH! BETTER RUN!



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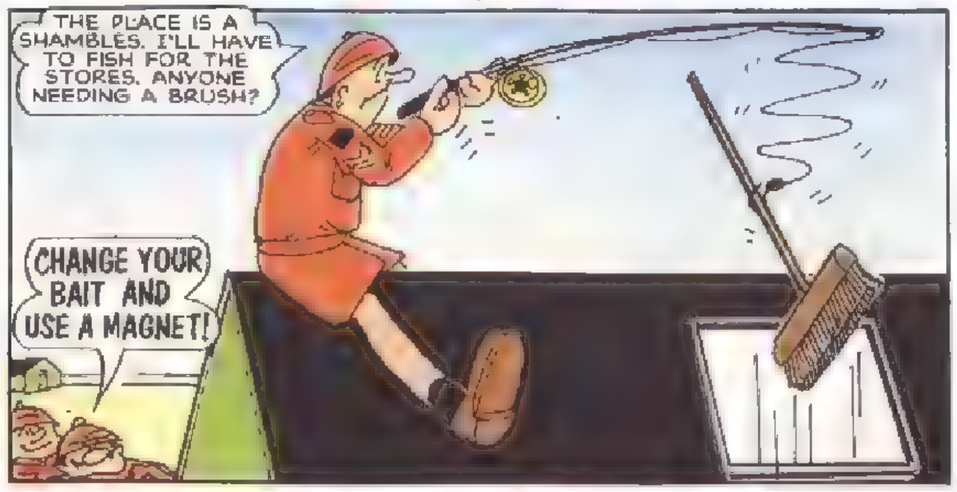


on the very same day in March 1951. Spooky or what?

As with our old friends Heck and Ayers, there were of course multifarious sites selling old comics, particularly **Beano**, **Beryl the Peril** and **Dennis** annuals e.g. *www.ukcollectibles.co.uk/comicannuals.htm or www.borderbookshop.co.uk/catalog.htm*. So hurrah at last for "Beano Artists" on www.paulmorris.co.uk/beano/artists/law.htm. This gives a reasonable biog for Law, beginning with his work for publishers D.C. Thomson after the end of World War II, continuing through to his death in 1971 at 63 years of age. Following local newspaper work, Law created *Dennis the Menace* in 1951, in 1953 adding *Beryl the Peril* for **The Topper**, and, from November 1960, *Corporal Clott* for **The Dandy**. It describes Law's style as changing considerably over the years, with early Dennis strips featuring rather "short, squat characters" with "tidy artwork". By the end of the 50s all Law's characters were taller and sketchier (and, in my humble opinion, absolutely brilliant).

www.hairy1.demon.co.uk/psfg/baxendal.htm alludes to Baxendale not wanting to copy *Beryl the Peril* when he created *Minnie the Minx*. This site also has a nice wee bit from Baxendale's **On Comedy**, which tells us that these guys were earning £2 per third of a page, and £6 per two-thirds. With luck a whole tenner was possible for a hard week's graft. And at a time when uberlord Hall was "down t' pit" for thruppence ha'penny a fortnight…

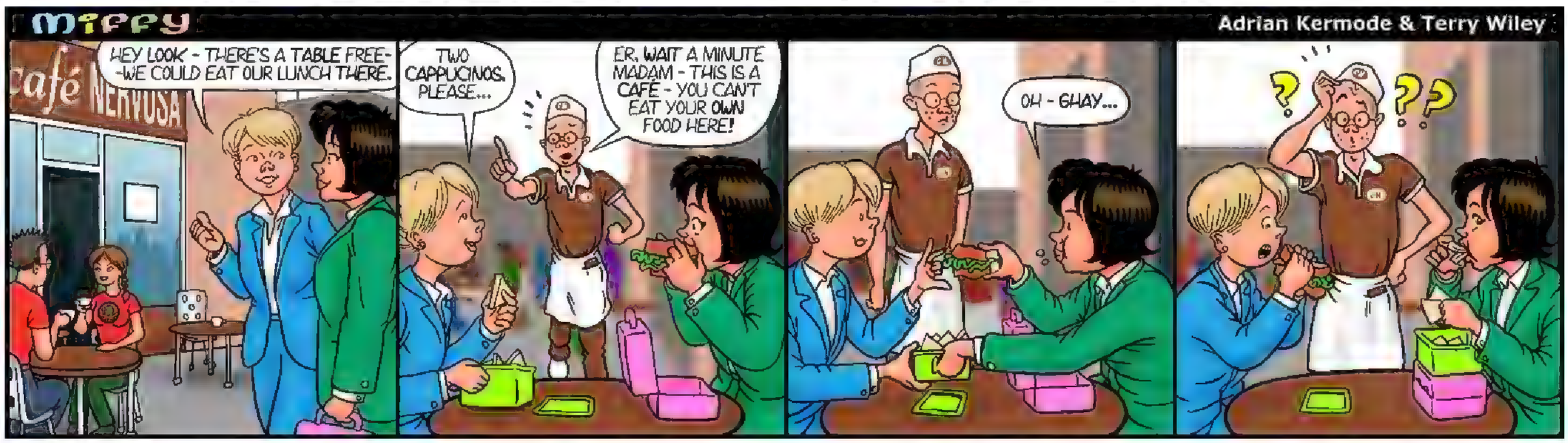
Law did over 1000 *Dennis* pages, according to *www.toonpedia.com/dennisb.htm*. He was still around for the introduction of Gnasher, Dennis' celebrated canine companion. There's a delightful Corporal Clott jpeg at *www.26pigs.com/dandy/characters.htm*, featuring a devilish Colonel Grumbly and the gormless Clott. What "26 pigs" means is anybody's guess - but their **Topper** page version has a nice Beryl jpeg too.

www.comicsuk.co.uk/Comic/InformationPages/DandyPages gives a good wee potted history of **The Dandy**, but "Your Comic Source in Yorkshire" caused my computer to crash, so I'll spare you the net address. A search for *Beryl the Peril* revealed on *www.kalrizienne.fsnet.co.uk/visitors_gallery.htm* that she was in fact some sort of pedigree dog or other, and nowt all to do with cartoons. Try it and see what the average Korean restaurant might refer to as an "entrée".

Sadly, the official Beano site on *www.beanotown.com* is particularly reticent when it comes to mentioning creators. Oddly, a site dedicated to strip cartoon **Beau Peep** on *www.users.tinyonline.co.uk/reo/toontalents-beaupeep.htm* has a short interview with **Peep** man Andrew Kettle, in which he reveals that he wrote *Beryl the Peril* for a time, although he fails to mention Law.

We'll draw a veil over the site which made reference to *Beryl the Peril* in the sense that "spanking" was an integral part of **Topper**-type punishments for errant young girls. Some of you are still too young. No, you'd be better off on (pause for breath) *www.scottish-sculpture.com/Works in Progress/Dennis and Gnasher.htm* which features a limited edition sculpture of our two pals, based on original drawings by Law from the 60s. At £189 a shot, please don't get trampled in the rush. And if I've typed in the wrong address, then tough. There's no compensation scheme on **Borderline** for repetitive strain injury.

And that's it. Not a lot. But just enough to whet one's appetite to dig those old annuals out of the loft and drool again over Corporal Clott and his madcap antics. I need help.


Miffy
Adrian Kermode & Terry Wiley
Café NERVOSA
HEY LOOK - THERE'S A TABLE FREE--WE COULD EAT OUR LUNCH THERE.
TWO CAPPUCINOS. PLEASE...
ER, WAIT A MINUTE MADAM - THIS IS A CAFÉ - YOU CAN'T EAT YOUR OWN FOOD HERE!
OH - GHAY...
??
??

THE ABC OF LOVE STREET

THE PETER HOGAN INTERVIEW

WITH the news that British journalist and comics writer Peter Hogan had been approached by Alan Moore to write for his America's Best Comics line, Borderline's Jay Eales took the opportunity to speak with Hogan about his career to date: the hits, the misses and the missing, presumed dead…

BORDERLINE: Can we start with a potted biography? Who is Peter Hogan, where does he come from and how did he find himself writing comics?

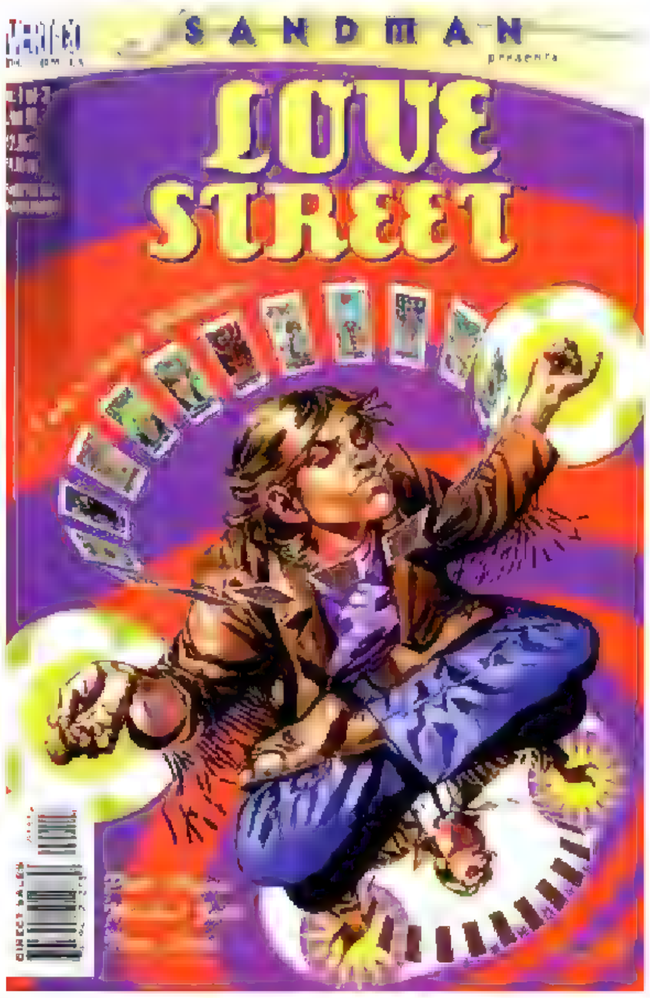
PETER HOGAN: I was born in 1954 in South London, not that far from where I live now. Left school at 16, went to work in a bookshop and stayed there for about eight years. Then I moved into book publishing as an editor, spent a year or so as a press officer for various record companies, then started writing journalism myself. I got to know a lot of comics people during the mid-to-late Eighties, and as a result of that Fleetway asked me to editorially hold the fort for a couple of weeks on Crisis, simply so that Steve MacManus could have a holiday! Then they asked me to stay on and edit Revolver, and after that crashed in

Click on Globe returns to contents

flames I decided to finally try writing the stuff myself. So I did.

BL: What is a typical working day like for you?
PH: That's changed a bit recently. It used to be that I was completely nocturnal, going to bed at eight in the morning and getting up about four in the afternoon - some of my friends even nicknamed me "The Count". But I've just moved house and had to adapt to a different routine as a result of that. So now I rise about noon, having gone to bed about four or five in the morning. Daytime isn't really worktime for me, in that although I do scribble down things in between phonecalls, letters and domestic chores, it isn't really focussed. The bulk of what I do comes in a concentrated blast after midnight... I'm talking about fiction here. I still do a little journalism, and that can be done any time and anywhere, but for comics and fiction in general I need everyone else to shut up and go away.

BL: Do you subscribe to the idea that comics in monthly pamphlet form are on their way out, and that the future is trade paperback-shaped?
PH: Yes and no. I think most of us who've been reading the stuff for years are hooked on getting that weekly fix, rather than being happy to wait six months for a collection... plus, not everything that's good makes it into book form. But books are a more satisfying format - you get a solid chunk of reading, and they're less ugly to store. Certainly, if I really like a story, I'll dump the comics and buy the book.



BL: What comics and other media helped to shape your childhood?
PH: All of them! Bob Dylan once said, "open your eyes and your ears and you're influenced," and I think that's true. In terms of comics I read everything I could get my hands on 'til I was about 17... after then I'd just read the occasional thing. The Claremont/Byrne X-Men was about the only title I was still reading when Warrior came along, and that of course changed the whole ball game.

BL: What's in your "to read" pile right now?
PH: I'm currently reading Tim Powers' Earthquake Weather and Peter Aykroyd's book on London. Next up will be Neil Gaiman's Coraline, a book on the biology of plagues, a book on Tibetan Buddhism, a book on the scandalous side of 1950s Hollywood... plus there's a five-inch-high pile of comics I just haven't gotten round to yet.

BL: And what's been on your CD player in the last week?
PH: The new David Bowie album, Kylie's *Fever*, a Pete Townshend live album, a boxed set of West Indian ska from the early Sixties, Skip Spence's *Oar*, Costello's *Blood & Chocolate*, Gordon Gano's *Hitting The Ground* and the Sinatra In Hollywood box.

BL: Name someone working in comics who you think doesn't get the credit they deserve.
PH: Mike Baron. I've been viciously culling my comics collection as a result of moving house, but I just can't bring myself to get rid of any Nexus or Badger. They're too good!

BL: How much impact would you say the Internet has had on the shape of the comics industry?
PH: It makes the gossip circulate faster, so people panic quicker. Beyond that, I'm not really sure.

BL: Outside of comics, where do your talents lie?
PH: I'm quite a good cook, or so I'm told! Like I said, I still do a little journalism, which is mainly a way of getting free entertainment... plus, I've started to experiment with other kinds of fiction. I've finished a couple of short stories, I've started writing a novel, sooner or later I'll have a crack at a screenplay. Which I'm best at, only time will tell.

BL: You're probably best known in the US mainstream comics industry for your Sandman-related work on The Dreaming and Sandman Presents: Love Street, and to 2000AD's readers for Durham Red, Strontium Dogs, Robo-Hunter, *assorted* Future Shocks *and* Vector 13 *strips, and your own* Timehouse *series. Do any stick out as particular favourites?*
PH: In terms of 2000AD, there's not that much - mainly because it was all early on and it just makes me wince to look at it now. But I think Rian Hughes and I did a good job on *Robo-Hunter*, and the last time I stumbled across the second *Timehouse* story it actually made me laugh out loud...

I enjoyed doing all the Sandman stories. They're great characters, it's a great world to play with and I learnt a ton through doing it, and from Neil and Alisa. I guess Love Street is probably my favourite, but I like them all.

BL: 2000AD produced an Action Special, resurrecting and reinventing a number of venerable British comics characters, such as The Spider *[by Mark Millar],* Doctor Syn *[by John Smith] and your own take on* The Steel Claw. *Do you feel a nostalgic buzz for these old characters at all?*
PH: No more than any other characters. That was actually the first comics story I wrote, back in 1991. I did think there was a lot that could have been done with the character, and would have liked to

Click on Globe returns to contents

do more. I had a whole storyline mapped out in which the Steel Claw prevented the assassination of Princess Diana!

BL: As I understand it, you experienced some heavy-handed wielding of the editorial pen with some of your 2000AD scripts, where your vision for Strontium Dogs *was at odds with the editor's. Do you recall how your storyline differed from its published form?*
PH: Well, the thing with *Strontium Dogs* and *Durham Red* was that they wanted it all put back the way it was before someone else had destroyed it. Which took quite a bit of doing - and then they kept changing their minds, changing the story lengths and so on. A bit of a nightmare, but I managed it - and I'd just got it to the point where it all made sense and Red had spun off into her own storyline when the editor changed. And the new editor rang me up and said something along the lines of, "I don't like you, I don't like your work, I'm not going to give you any more work, and those stories that are in the drawer that have already been approved by both the previous editor and the editor-in-chief I'm going to drastically cut and rewrite". So I put the phone down on him, and instructed them by letter to remove my name from that work, and it eventually ran under the byline of "Alan Smithee".

In fact, the *Durham Red* story was pretty much what I wrote, except that a character died instead of being wounded. But the second half of the *Strontium Dogs* story bore very little resemblance to what I wrote - and I know I'm biased, but it really wasn't an improvement.
By this point I was already working for Vertigo, and the contrast couldn't have been greater. Alisa Kwitney was a terrific editor, and quite tough - she'd constantly throw stuff back at me to rewrite, but I didn't mind in the least, because the story was being improved, and because there was an actual dialogue involved.

BL: Which takes us on to your work for DC; Alisa Kwitney, at the time editor of Vertigo's The Dreaming, invited you to pitch ideas for the new series after reading some of your 2000AD work. Do you remember which strips prompted her to make the call?
PH: Not really. I got a phone call out of the blue, because Alisa had been looking for writers and had stumbled across a folder of my very early 2000AD material in the slush pile. As I recall, those were mainly *Future Shocks* – probably including *Old Flames*, the one about the dragon convention at the Albert Hall, which may have appealed to her.

BL: There was a period on The Dreaming where it was decided that sales were being hurt by the loose continuity of an anthology format, and a new approach was adopted, with you tag-teaming with Caitlin Kiernan on the book. How did that work?
PH: I think they realised that not everyone could write Sandman stories, and so they picked myself and Caitlin to take The Dreaming over and do a long, ongoing story. So, we'd have conference calls with the two of us, plus Neil and Alisa, and we thrashed out this ramshackle storyline... but I don't think it really worked. To me the delight of the Sandman universe was that it could contain pretty much anything and everything - historical stories, whatever - and confining it to the Dreaming itself and a mere handful of characters struck me as a retrograde move. But that's what they wanted to do, and so one of my stories - Love Street - was hived off into The Sandman Presents, and they then gave The Dreaming to Caitlin.

BL: The Sandman Presents series launched with Love Street, didn't it? A John Constantine story that neatly tied in with early Sandman continuity, I thought - with art by Michael Zulli and covers by Duncan Fegredo, if I remember correctly?
PH: You do remember correctly.

BL: Is that your Constantine story, or do you have any desire for a crack at Hellblazer one day?
PH: Well, I used Constantine for a cameo in my "Marquee Moon" script as well. I don't know - if they asked me I'd consider it, but possibly not. I re-read Alan's Swamp Thing recently, and I much prefer his Constantine to anybody else's - in fact, I don't think anybody else has even come close, except maybe Neil. I've enjoyed odd stories of Garth's and Jamie's and Paul's and so on - and I'm looking forward to seeing Mike Carey's version - but by fleshing him out they've killed the mystery, you know? I've said before that Constantine works best as a guest star, and I still think that's true. Of course, this is probably just sour grapes because they've never given me the title!

BL: "Marquee Moon"; that was another Sandman Presents story you were working on, with art by Peter Doherty and D'Israeli? What happened to that?
PH: I have no idea. Neil wanted me to do a story about punk, and Alisa

wanted me to do a story about werewolves, and so I wrote "Marquee Moon", which was both. After Alisa left, my relationship with Vertigo pretty much ended, which mystified me somewhat at the time and still does. And "Marquee Moon" went into limbo, which is where it remains. It's been drawn and lettered, and I don't know what the problem is – I've been told that they think it needs art changes, but I don't know what those are. I asked Karen about it at the last Bristol con, and she said that basically they still can't make up their minds whether to publish it or not. And this even despite the fact that The Clash let us use them for a guest appearance!

BL: While we're on the subject of the ones that got away, can you tell us about your stories for Kitchen Sink's New Adventures of The Spirit?
PH: Sure. When that title was first announced I sent a copy of my first Dreaming story to Will Eisner, asking if I could be considered as a possible writer. And I got this wonderful note back from him, informing me that he'd told Kitchen Sink to invite me on board. So I wrote a Christmas Spirit story featuring Silken Floss, which Ted Slampyak did the art for. It should have been in the fourth issue, but then Kitchen Sink put the whole series back by some months, which of course affected the Christmas scheduling. So then it was scheduled for issue nine... but they cancelled the magazine with issue eight! By this point I'd also written a second story called "Iced?", a locked-room murder mystery which Charlie Adlard was going to draw, but he never got the chance.

I occasionally hear rumours of the title resurfacing, but so far no show. If nothing happens by this Christmas, I'll let Wes Tumulka put the scripts on his Spirit website. So, all in all a bit frustrating... but at least I got that letter from Mr Eisner, which made my day, my month and my year.

BL: Bringing us right up to date, you've recently joined a very select group of writers invited by Alan Moore to join him in writing for his ABC Comics imprint. That must be good for the self-esteem!
PH: Certainly is! Alan's the guvnor, after all.

BL: Can you go into detail about The Many Worlds of Tesla Strong special?
PH: It's 64 pages long, and it'll be out early in 2003. It kicks off with Solomon larking about on Tom's searchboard and accidentally vanishing off to another parallel Earth... but the searchboard comes back without him, and there's no way of knowing which Earth he's ended up on. So Tesla sets off to find him, travelling from Earth to Earth until she does, and meeting all kinds of parallel-Earth Teslas - some of whom we've seen before, some of whom we haven't. This divides it rather neatly into segments, and each of those is handled by a different "good girl" artist. I've promised Scott Dunbier I wouldn't tell anyone who they are just yet, but maybe you can strap him down and force it out of him. Anyway, Tom Strong also puts in an appearance, plus we've got a serious villain and a lot of parallel-Earth gorillas. If you like comics about cute girls and big monkeys, this is the one for you! Continuity-wise, it's set before Tesla acquires her lava boy. Or maybe he's just out of town at the time...

BL: A little bird tells me that there's a 6 issue series in the works. Is that also for ABC, or another publisher? And are you in a position to talk about that yet?
PH: Yeah, I can tell you a little. It's for ABC, and I'm actually writing it in collaboration with Alan, which is quite an education, to put it mildly. It's called Terra Obscura, and it features the Golden Age characters from Tom Strange's Earth, picking up on them three years after we last saw them. So at this point some of them are still active as heroes, but others are missing, some are dead, some have retired, some have gone bad. The Terror computer program is running a "zero tolerance" approach to law enforcement in three different cities, and of course that isn't going down too well with the bad guys...

I don't want to give too much away at this point. Suffice to say that it's a rip-roaring superhero mystery yarn which will hopefully completely redefine the genre and make us a fortune! And we're having a lot of fun with it - we go for long walks round Northampton eating cheese rolls and cake, and we laugh a lot.

BL: Is there anything else on your work slate at the moment?
PH: Nope, not right now. This'll keep me busy for the next couple of months, and if Alan wants me to do anything else for ABC after this, then obviously my first loyalty is to him... But in the long term, J.H. Williams III and I have been talking about doing something creator-owned together once he gets done with Promethea. Other than that, I'm open to offers.

The Many Worlds of Tesla Strong 64 page special will be published by America's Best Comics/ Wildstorm this autumn.

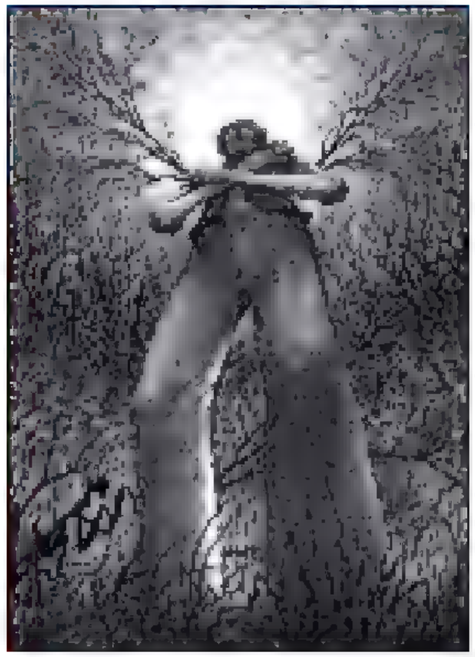
Click on Globe returns to contents

THEY CAME FROM DOWN UNDER

Joss O'Kelly considers Australian picture books for older readers and their relationship to comics...

BACK when Borderline was young (#2, September 2001), Pete Ashton wrote a piece on picture books, focussing primarily on Raymond Briggs but also mentioning other artists and writers. Picture books, he quite rightly noted, are a "hotbed of creativity, playing with ways to use pictures and words to tell a story."

Without getting too bogged down in the differences and similarities between comic books and picture books, it is at least obvious that both use both pictures and text to tell a story and that both are frequently and wrongly perceived as the



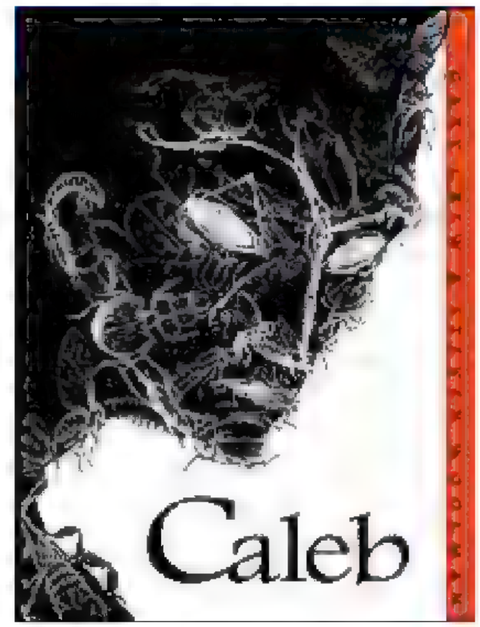
preserve of children. While adults are derided for reading comic books - surely they are just for kids? – in our text-centred education system older children are weaned off picture books - surely they are just for babies?

Well, yes and no. While there are many fine writers and illustrators who do great work for very young children, the best of which can be equally enjoyed by their parents, there are also writers and illustrators who work for an older age group and produce work that is best appreciated by older children, young adults, and just plain adults. Briggs is a prime example, but here I want to write about some creators who are less well known, at least internationally.

A handful of writers and artists based around two publishing houses in Australia have, over the past seven or so years, been producing work of an extraordinary quality. Some produce more or less unequivocal picture books, but clearly some of them are au fait with the world of comics and use speech balloons or make references within the story to comics techniques. In most cases, as with comics, the pictures are just as important as the text, if not more so, and skipping through just glancing at the illustrations is a sure-fire way to fail to understand what is going on. The subject matter ranges from slightly creepy to downright terrifying, and the themes include the power of dreams, chronic depression, the evils of colonisation and the lasting effects of war.

The first of these books I encountered was Caleb, written by Gary Crew and illustrated by Steven Woolman. The pair had already won the the Childrens' Book Council of Australia's 1995 Picture Book of the Year award for The Watertower, an unsettling read about two boys who go for a swim in the eponymous tower. Clues abound as to what actually happened that day, but the ending is deliberately ambiguous.

Clues also come thick and fast in Caleb, but the trick here is that even though the reader knows perfectly well what is going to happen, the ghastly inevitability of it still shocks. The story, of a precocious biology student and his solitary obsession with insects, is illustrated by Woolman in two ways. Firstly he uses framed black and white pen and ink drawings in a deliberately Gothic style. These both create the atmosphere, one of profound unease, and provide clues and visual puzzles. Secondly, and most importantly, behind the text on every page are sepia sketches of insects, just as a Victorian naturalist might have drawn, and it is only by carefully following these pictures that the reader can understand the story.



Gary Crew is one of Australia's most highly celebrated writers. He has won Australian Children's Book of the Year on several occasions, both for picture book texts and longer novels. In The Kraken, Crew tells the story of a child, blind from birth, who regains his sight though the power of imagination, while Valley of Bones is a ripping yarn about finding and rescuing a pterodactyl fossil. Both are text-heavy and conventionally illustrated, but the presence in the one of the kraken and in the other of an apparently real live pterodactyl adds to the element of the mysterious, or even the macabre, that is usually present in Crew's work – and is also the kind of fantastic element often associated with comics.

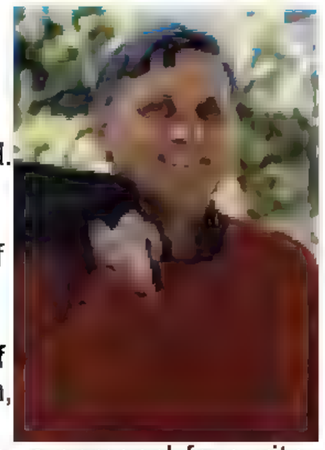
Tagged, Crew's third collaboration with Steven Woolman, is the most obviously comics-influenced book of the pack. It is in traditional comics format with speech balloons,

panels and so forth and is also *about* comics, specifically the war comics that Jmmy loves to read. It is only when his dog leads him into a derelict factory where he meets an old Vietnam veteran that he begins to question the gung-ho attitudes prevalent in the worst of comic books. There are visual themes here too: three ghastly hanging dolls, representing the veteran's estranged family, and a "white snake" motif that recurs throughout, symbolic of many things, but perhaps primarily of the rope that led the speaker to the rest of his life and his best friend to his death.

Woolman also provided the illustrations for Dreamwalker, by well-known fantasy writer Isobelle Carmody. The insomniac protagonist wants a career as penciller and inker in comic books and spends his nights drawing. One night he finds himself dreaming of, and subsequently drawing, an evil sorceress. As it turns out, it is by the acts of dreaming, and drawing, that the evil can be defeated. With text in a handwriting-style font, most of the story is on sepia paper accompanied by 'Ken's' pencil drawings, while the "other world" section is on black paper with white print. The drawings are of course absolutely vital to the story on a number of levels.

The Viewer, Crew's only collaboration to date with artist Shaun Tan, is an unsettling account of a boy who witnesses the past and future of all human history in a strange machine he finds on the city dump, and whose curiosity finally draws him into the machine itself. Tan uses a circular design throughout with an eye always at the centre to disturbing effect. Shaun Tan is an award-winning artist and writer who lives near Perth. Mostly self-taught, Tan was 16 when his SF illustrations first appeared in Australian magazine *Aurealis* in 1990. In 1992 he won the L. Ron Hubbard Illustrators of the Future Contest, and since then has scooped the Spectrum Gold and Silver Awards, the Aurealis and Ditmar Awards for Australian Science Fiction and Fantasy, and most recently, the 2001 World Fantasy Award as Best Artist.

Apart from The Viewer, Tan *(below, right)* has produced several outstanding picture books. The Rabbits, written by John Marsden, *(above, right)* himself a multiple award-winner, won the CBC Picture Book of the Year and is a powerful look at colonization, using the introduction of rabbits into Australia as a springboard. The Red Tree is an account of a day in the life of a victim of depression, while The Lost Thing, a personal favourite of mine, is a wonderfully surreal picture book with Daliesque illustrations of bizarre part-mechanical, part-organic creatures set in a soulless cityscape. For the background Tan has used a cut-up treatise on thermodynamics. The Lost Thing itself, a sort of cross between a boiler and an octopus, is an engaging character and only the hardest-hearted reader can remain untouched by its story.



So, are these books comicbooks? Strictly speaking mostly not, though they do employ some of the same techniques and tread some of the same territory. Are they for children? Not young children, no; but whoever has been putting about the bizarre theory that people grow out of pictures and should progress in a linear fashion from picture books to books with some pictures to books with no pictures at all deserves a good slap. As far as subject matter and the sophistication of the artwork goes, these books are aimed at secondary age, though obviously there will always be more mature younger readers who can get something out of them. Will they appeal to adult readers of comics? Yes!

And finally, where can you find them? Reluctantly I have to say that aside from buying them online, "only with great difficulty" is probably the most accurate answer. Those of us in the know buy these books and others like them for our libraries and shelve them with comic books and graphic novels: what else is there to do? They are picture book-sized and hence much too large for regular shelves and they certainly do not belong in the children's section with the likes of Judith Kerr's Mog, Mick Inkpen's Kipper and Emma Chichester Clark's Blue Kangaroo books. Bookshops have similar problems - picture books are for little children after all, and they are also quite expensive: justifiably so, as hardback picture books are beautifully produced and long-lasting. So why, and where, should they stock the likes of these?

But it is worth persevering. Anyone seriously interested in the way in which text and pictures can work together to create a truly satisfying read should jettison their prejudices about who picture books are for, head for the local library or local or online bookshop, and see what's on offer.

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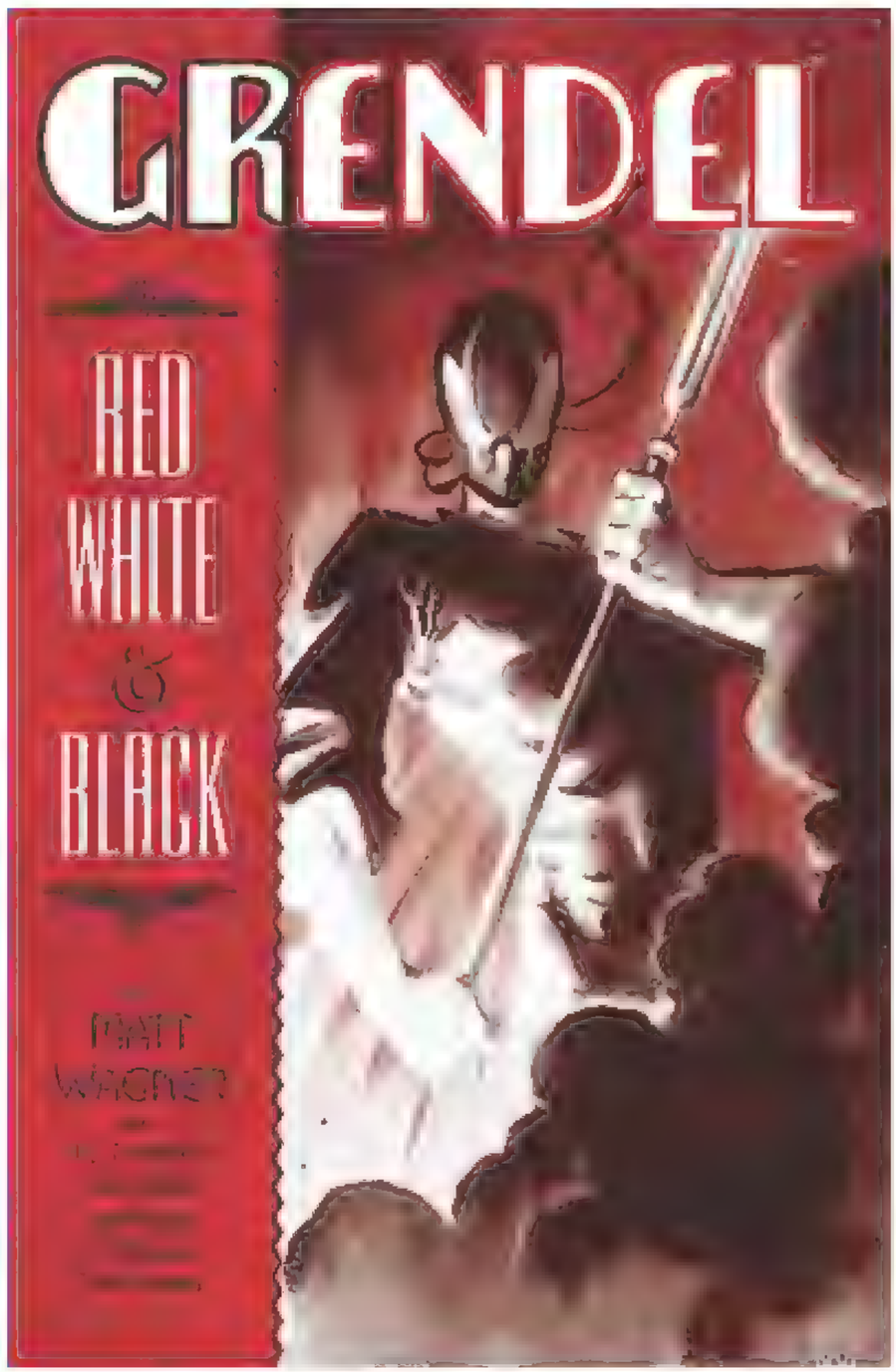
VIVAT GRENDEL

A MATT WAGNER FEATURETTE



MATT WAGNER'S series **Grendel** first appeared in 1982 in **Comico Primer** #2, an anthology allowing talented amateurs to gain exposure within the comics industry. The character of Grendel was a crime lord with a line in snappy patter and a moral sense that belied his underworld position. In the story Grendel kills a city councilman who is using underage girls in his prostitution ring. After this he honours a prearranged meeting with his nemesis, the man-wolf Argent and, following a brief battle, makes his escape.

This story led to **Grendel** being granted its own series in a black and white title less than a year later, at the start of 1983. However, within a further year and after only three issues the title ended, its story unfinished.

Wagner immediately returned with **Mage**, a full colour comic inked by Sam Kieth. Wagner has described **Mage** as coming from the heart and **Grendel** from the head, and this bipolar approach to his creations was reinforced with the reappearance of **Grendel** as a backup strip in **Mage** from issue 6 onwards. The new version - eventually collected as **Devil by the Deed** - was a leap forward in both approach and ambition. Wagner's art had greatly improved; using a fresh and cartoon-like quality akin to Harvey Kurtzman and a varied use of storytelling devices, the comic now looked much more accomplished and Wagner expanded his story ideas outwards ambitiously. Using blocks of text against a kaleidoscopic background of Art Deco panelling and multiple images, the story was a retelling and continuation of the aborted three issue series, replacing Grendel's quips and witty dialogue with an almost detached air that lent this new approach enormous gravitas. With a civilian identity - socialite author and millionaire genius Hunter Rose - Grendel's rivalry with Argent was played out against a larger background until his Machiavellian schemes worked against him and his destruction was engineered by his young ward, Stacy Palumbo, in revenge for Grendel's earlier murder of her uncle.

Thus Hunter Rose's tale was completed. But then Wagner came back with a new set of Hunter Rose stories; and now there are yet more, to be seen in Dark Horse's forthcoming **Grendel: Red, White & Black** series. I asked whether these new additions to the legend have always existed in Wagner's head - or do they just keep coming out of the dark?

Matt Wagner says, "A thorough and utter mix. Some are untold tales that I've had rattling around in my brain for a bit while others are distinctly written to either the particular strengths or peculiar interests of the artist involved. Sometimes I'll ask the artist what they feel like drawing or even what most attracts them to the character of Grendel. Darick Robertson stated outright that he wanted to draw scenes filled with grotesquery and decay. Tom Fowler claimed he liked to draw both naked people and fat people. Both their stories were then tooled to meet these specific requests. Andi Watson's story stemmed from a single pin-up he had done for me by way of a thank you for writing the introduction to his **Geisha** collection. Kelley Jones, for obvious reasons, got an all-Argent story and, of course, it looks absolutely awesome.

"Still others are retellings of details from Hunter's life that have already been told. Most notably, Phil Hester & Ande Parks, Michael Oeming and Cliff Chiang are visualizing stories found in the original black & white issues of **Grendel** - the story of Grendel and Argent's first battle following the murder of Barry Palumbo. Dan Brereton's tale presents a slightly different take on the infamous Seaboard Massacre, an event from the latter portion of Hunter's ruthless career. And Michael Zulli seemed the perfect choice to illustrate Hunter's final moments: the confessional aftermath of Grendel and Argent's epic and bloody Armageddon. He was."

After the initial Hunter Rose saga **Grendel** later returned as an ongoing series, scripted by Wagner and illustrated by a roster of artists such as Tim Sale, Bernie Mireault and The Pander Bros. With Hunter Rose deceased, Grendel was now portrayed as a force that possessed its host, lending them the direction and readiness to accomplish their darkest needs. Taking one host after another, Grendel eventually becomes seen by society as a synonym for the Devil, is used as a totem to bring down a corrupt world church, and is eventually displayed as a standard by politician Orion Assante, who assumes control of a war-ravaged world far in the future, declaring

Click on Globe returns to contents

himself Grendel-Khan and overseeing his dedicated army, themselves adopting the name of Grendels.

A massive and complex work, the fifty-issue run of **Grendel** contains many story elements that are only alluded to in the comics. Is Hunter the only Grendel that has these untold stories, or might we see similar expansions for the other incarnations?

"Well, out of my original cycle of narratives, only Hunter and Grendel-Prime are open to this sort of expansion," Wagner explains. "Christine Spar and Brian Li Sung both have very tightly choreographed storylines and, basically, we've already seen their every moment under the guise of Grendel. Eppy Thatcher has a bit more leeway, but not much. I don't imagine he was ever dressing up as Grendel of his own accord: only when his drug-induced visions called forth the persona in response to the malignance of the Catholic Church and its corrupt Pope, Innocent XLII. And, of course, Orion Assante never actively assumes the identity as a disguise but rather as an effective bit of military heraldry - in fact, it's the exact opposite of a secret identity. The stories surrounding the effects of that public assumption of character are what **Grendel Tales** is all about.

"So, again, only Hunter and Grendel-Prime provide us with much of an opportunity for further yarns within the structure of their own stories.

Grendel has an established continuity. This could be a constraint

"One of the things I've always found ironic about the popularity of Hunter Rose has been the relative lack of material involving the character. Up until we did the original **Black, White & Red** series a few years ago, there really wasn't much in the way of actual Hunter Rose stories. Aside from the two issues of the first **Batman/Grendel** crossover, most readers have only ever seen Hunter in the **Devil By The Deed** storyline and that's only 40-odd pages long! Still, the character remained incredibly popular with readers, who were always requesting more of his dark adventures. It speaks of the iconic power that Hunter obviously strikes readers with to merit such a response. Still, Hunter led a very short life and so, obviously, could only have *so* many escapades. There'll come a point where the gaps in his legend will all be filled."

Wagner's mention of Grendel-Prime refers to a character introduced in the final run of **Grendel** and published by Dark Horse as **War Child**. To protect his young son Jupiter, Orion Assante has created a solar-powered cyborg to act as a paladin to protect the child from danger both within and without. As such he, like Hunter Rose before him, bookends the **Grendel** storyline, and allows for stories at either end of the epic to be told.

"Grendel-Prime, on the other hand, is an ageless cyborg whose adventures could conceivably stretch on forever," Wagner elaborates. "In the recently published Grendel illustrated novel, **Past Prime**, author Greg Rucka depicts the formation of a relationship that I had hinted at in the second **Batman/Grendel** crossover; Prime's partnership with the errant warrior, Susan Veraghen. These two lead many adventures until Susan eventually dies of old age (again, as shown in **Batman/Grendel II**). So, there's an enormous wealth of stories to be told concerning these many years that, to Prime, are only a small section of his long and lonely existence. I think I'm going to follow Mignola's example with **Hellboy** and have the next book of prose consist of various authors writing short stories that will follow the many adventures of Susan and Prime."

The world of **Grendel** has an established continuity. This could be a constraint, yet writers appear to be given a fairly free rein, which seemed to be the case with the **Grendel Tales** comics, where many different creators told a variety of stories set in the post-Orion Assante world.

"Well, all the Grendel material is sanctioned by me", comments Wagner. "And that means I oversee everything that's produced but, like you mentioned with **Grendel Tales**, it still means a pretty free hand for the creators. My main function in that case is to just keep the general chronology and such straight. But new and different approaches, additions to the existing mythology, even suggestions that might greatly affect future continuity... all are more than welcome. And of course, with the case of the Susan and Prime short stories, I'd also be acting as illustrator: as I did in the collaboration with Greg on **Past Prime**."

This is not the first time that **Grendel** has moved beyond the pages of comics; Wagner once wrote an unpublished Hunter Rose novel. Are there any plans to bring this aborted **Grendel** novel to fruition, maybe in the hands of another writer, like Greg Rucka?

Wagner muses. "Hmm… haven't thought of that project in years. Maybe someday I'll go back and try and polish it into shape. But until then... no, I have no intention of handing it over to another writer. It's my mess to either clean up or do away with."

As to whether eager fans will ever see the novel in print as a comic, Wagner says, "No, it was meant to be completely prose. **Devil by the Deed** already is the comic version, as is a good deal of both of the **Black, White & Red** series."

Dark Horse seems committed to reprinting the original fifty issues of **Grendel** and reintroducing them to the shelves of comic stores. Already the first nineteen issues have been made available in both comic and trade paperback format, variously entitled **Devil's Legacy**, **The Devil Inside** and **Devil Tales**. Does this ongoing program of reprinting allow Wagner to go back and fix things, or rewrite parts to improve the continuity?

"We plan to eventually return all the Grendel material to a current "in print" status from Dark Horse", says Wagner. "Next on the block, following **Red, White & Black**, is the ten-chapter, John K. Snyder/Jay Geldhof storyline, **God**

And The Devil. And, even though I'm happy with the fifty issues as they stand, I'm sure I might change a word or phrase here and there: nothing drastic, though. I don't believe in noodling with work very much after it's completed. I always feel the need to move on. The biggest result of these "remastered" editions, though, is the fact that we get to re-colour the artwork! The marvellous advent of computer colouring will especially benefit the upcoming storyline, with its labyrinthine plot and garish social commentary."

Grendel fans will note that these Dark Horse reprints omit the **Incubation Years** issues, seen by some readers at the time to be esoteric to the point of incomprehensibility. Spanning several hundred years, those four issues charted the progress of Grendel from an individual to a subcultural and then social icon and, finally, to an antichristian force set against a corrupt Catholic church. They are a challenging yet rewarding read and set the stage for the upcoming storyline.

"We're reprinting the last issue of the **Incubation Years** (the one drawn by Tim Sale) along with a bit of a summary of the other three as **God & The Devil #** 0. **God & The Devil** should be an interesting reprint though, considering how far ahead of its time the subject matter has proven to be. What with the shaky state of the Catholic Church and global warming kicking into full effect, this storyline is suddenly contemporary! I just saw a TV report of an enormous gathering outside the gates of Graceland to honour the anniversary of Elvis's death. Grown men were weeping like babies! It was absolutely an experience similar to religious ecstasy for these people! 'Amen, thankaveramuch!'"

The first issue of the four-part ***Grendel: Red, White & Black*** *is scheduled to be in stores on September 11th. **Borderline** is currently working on a Big Interview with Matt Wagner for a future issue.*

THE ROAD TO MECCA

Marvel Mangaverse writer Kevin Gunstone shares his impressions of the experience that was the San Diego Comic-Con 2002

FOR years I've wanted to go to San Diego [SD]. I've always said "Next year I'm going to go…", having always looked upon SD as *the* place to be. This year I *was* finally going. To be honest, if you're not taken seriously when you're writing a book for Marvel, then you never will be. What follows is a selection of random thoughts about this year's con and the whole experience.

Sunday - Heathrow Airport

Now, for some strange reason I seemed to think that the flight left at around midday. It didn't, it was 11.15am. Sometimes, an idea is so fixed in your mind that you don't feel the need to actually check the details, but arriving at Heathrow I could find neither the flight nor the check-in listed anywhere. Panicking, I thought I'd better look at the ticket to see if I was in the wrong terminal. To my delight, I found that yeah, I was in the wrong terminal, but even better than that – I was at the wrong bloody airport!

Arrived at Gatwick ten minutes too late to check-in. The flight the following day was heavily overbooked, so I had little choice but to accept the offer of a flight to Phoenix and a connecting one to SD.

Finally touched down in San Diego. It was late in the evening, I'd been travelling for far too long and I had no idea where anything was. Finding a taxi outside I made the short journey to the "luxuriously appointed" Harborview Inn and Suites, not the worst hotel I've ever stayed in, and it had the comparative decadence of a walk-in closet.

Monday and Tues – Pre Con

With a couple of days to go before the start of the Con, I'm able to spend some time wandering around SD finding out just where everything is. I manage to get lost within the first couple of hours. Plenty of time to sleep, read some Thucydides and watch some TV as well, work out the rules to baseball and start to follow the fortunes of the San Diego Padres.

I also manage to hook up with an inker friend, Kris Justice, who is similarly making his first trip over. Kris has already been out here for around a week and we go and look at the con center, realising it's about the same size as Wembley, if not bigger. Then, it's time for a quick adjournment to the nearby 'Dick's' bar. Find the staff a bit rude and later find out they're *supposed* to be like that…

Wednesday - The Preview Day

Having spent the morning making myself smell nice, courtesy of "Miracle Homme" (I didn't want to hear *any* complaints about BO), I popped along to the Con to pick up my 'pro' badge before the short walk back to 'Dick's'. Had a drink or two and was full of nervous anticipation as I wondered just what to expect. Finally, we were allowed into the hall - and it's big. Really big, having apparently almost doubled in floor size in the last year alone.

The object of the trip was to

meet editors, and hand out some new proposals and samples. I knew that by the end of it I'd probably end up hating myself for repeating the same shtick over and over again. But that was the reason why I was there and I just had to get on with it.

At the end of the preview day, after a mere four hours, I was knackered. I tried not to think that I had another four full days of this as well. Slowly making my way back to the hotel I ran into Kris at the nearby Horton Plaza; he'd lost the people he was supposed to be staying with, and seemed as bewildered as me by the size of the whole affair. A visit to the Plaza food court was immediately called for.

Thursday

The first full day. I was ready for this and was looking forward to it. I knew what I had to do, be confident, friendly, shake them warmly by the hand and look them straight in the eye.

Arriving at the Center, I spent the first hour or so scouring the bargain bins trying to find back issues of **Mangaverse**. Not for my personal collection, you understand, but to hand out as samples. I finally found a stash of issue two, which was a relief as it's one of my favourites. I also mentally tallied the unsold copies of **Mangaverse** and the **New X-Men**.

Apart from the publishers' and dealers' stands, there were a lot of peripherals, be they toy, model, film or games companies. Whilst I realise that they are all part and parcel of the present day industry, and no doubt bring in a lot of cash, I gave them a wide berth as it's only the comics I'm interested in. The only thing that did tempt me was some original *Samurai Jack* sketches and animation cels from the Cartoon Network stand. Very pricey, though, and I knew that if I bought one I'd get into all sorts of trouble when I arrived home.

Thursday was a good day, though. I met a lot of the people I set out to meet and it was great to put faces to the email addresses. It also quickly became apparent just how busy a lot of people were. This was not the kind of relaxed, ambling around, I-think-I'll-go-to-the-bar-now con I was used to in Bristol. This was all about business. One editor who I had a meeting with told me that for the duration of the con he was having two breakfasts and two lunches every day. I now gather that a breakfast or lunch appointment carries more weight than a mid-morning one and will take it as a sign of future success.

However, not having a schedule that was exactly overloaded I decided to attend the opening night party. I haven't got a problem with showing ID to prove my age, but I couldn't help but feel that the person on the door was slightly overzealous. Especially in regard to the wheelchair bound person in front of me who was at least fifty (and looked it), and almost barred because he couldn't *prove* his age. You kept hearing the same line being trotted out about "California State legislation", but this is something which seems to remove the ability of individuals to make commonsense decisions for themselves.

The party itself was outdoors, and had possibly the poorest DJ in the world, the kind of person who in Britain would mainly be hired for weddings – if at all. A horrible selection of Eighties songs, which I've always thought of as the decade that music forgot. The evening wasn't helped when a person of indeterminate gender lead a sing-along of *Secret Agent Man* but knew hardly any of the words.

Friday

It was only the third day, but I woke up feeling as tired as when I'd gone to bed, something that was reflected in my voice when I made the daily call home. I felt as though I was sagging. I needed a shower and a swift smack round the face to wake up.

First panel of the day was about the influence of Manga on American comics, something I felt duty bound to attend since it was moderated by my **Mangaverse** cohort Ben Dunn and included my editor C.B. Cebulski. The panel itself was quite interesting as they talked about the origins of Manga and the early influence of Disney. It was also a chance to meet Ben for the first time - I've known him for a while now, so it was good to finally meet him in the flesh, so to speak. Friendly wife as well.

Whilst doing the rounds on the convention floor, I'd been keeping an eye out for a couple of people who I thought would be there. I've been corresponding with a couple of the ladies from Sequential Tart, but was surprised to find they didn't have a stand. So, having no clue as to what they looked like, I spent a lot of time trying to inconspicuously read any female name badges that passed me by - something that must have led people to think that I had a particular breast fixation. Well, alright then…

As a brief aside, do not, I repeat, do not take photos anywhere close to Lou Ferrigno. I heard of more than one occasion when he went up to con-goers and demanded $10, simply because, although not the object of the picture, he might have been in the background.

Buffy inker Will Conrad meets a hero, Stan Lee, at this year's SDCC2002

Friday, to be truthful, wasn't the most fruitful of days. Nobody seemed to be around who I wanted to talk to and it was frustrating. This did leave more time to look for some comics to buy and a personal highlight was picking up a copy of Archie's classic **Mighty Crusaders** #1 (1960s vintage) for a mere two dollars. Enough to put a

Jinky aka Banzai Girl with Sergio Aragones at this year's SDCC

smile on any face. I also ran into an ex-pat friend of mine, Mike Perkins, who's now working at the Tampa compound for Crossgen. I've known Mike for a good number of years as we started trying to break into the biz around the same time, so to see him out here and have a good gossip about mutual friends was great

As the evening rolled round, I thought it would be good to attend the Eisners (always great for motivation). However this was a *really* boring ceremony. Introduced by Scott Shaw! - a man described in the programme as "always hilarious"... I can tell you right now that he was about as funny as galloping knob-rot.

What with introductions, inductees, and various "other" awards before the Eisners even started, the evening had the pace of a Tarkovsky film. I felt like awarding 'The award for the most boring award', which would have comfortably gone to 'The award for best retail outlet'. We were "treated" to pictures of all nine nominees, the four on the shortlist, and finally the winner; none of them looked as good as Dave's in Brighton.

Despite everything being immeasurably bigger and more professional than Bristol, I did really start to miss the chaotic amateurishness of the UK awards. The only bright spot amongst all these japes was one or two seemingly 'well sauced' presenters. Alcohol and award ceremonies do mix, just ask Tony Millionaire.

All through the ceremony my mood hadn't been helped by the perennial bloke behind me - a man who, on perusing the nominees in the booklet, proceeded to issue forth about the "worthiness" of certain titles and creators even though he admitted to not having read any of them. There was just something about him - even the way he clapped - that made me want to turn round and give him a smack.

Enough was enough and I needed a drink. A big one. Thankfully, there was a portable bar to one side of the hall, where the staff then refused to serve me as I had no valid ID on me. I was aghast. "Do I really look under 21?" I asked, "Look! I've got greying temples!"

Saturday

Lunch with Ben at a 'British' pub in the Marriott. Nice piece of fish. Waitress dropped a large glass of coke that smashed all over the table. All very embarrassing, didn't know where to put my face, but I was quickly handed a napkin by a nice editor from Humanoids and thankfully the leather trousers escaped unscathed.

Spoke with C.B. again and later a small group of us headed over to Marvel's hospitality suite. Not as big as you'd have thought, just a largish room, with a table, sofa and a few other chairs. Lots of booze though, including the largest bottle of Jack Daniels I have ever seen. I heard that they originally had a smaller bottle, but that was stolen the previous night by a retailer. They knew who it was though and he had to shamefacedly replace it the following day.

Don't think it wasn't great being in the Marvel room though! Sitting on the twentieth floor, looking out over the bay in the early evening and drinking free beer. Personally, I was asking myself how the bloody hell has all this happened?

Went along to the masquerade party in the evening, but thought I'd sit outside in the mistaken belief that screens were going to relay what was taking place inside. They weren't, so it was back inside. This meant that I couldn't have any cigarettes apart from popping out and presumably missing all the good costumes. It did however, provide a massive ego boost. How would you feel when a couple of teenage girls realise you've written for Marvel and proceed to get down on their knees and tell you they're not worthy? "Oh," I said, "It's nothing really ..."

Sunday – Last Day and Home

After three and a half tiring and at times stressful days, the end was finally in sight. On the one hand I was kind of relieved the whole thing was coming to an end. But on the other, a bit disappointed, as once you get into the pace of the Con it is really exciting.

I managed to attend a couple of panels. The one I'd really been looking forward to was the Kirby panel, where a bunch of old lags got up on stage and remembered the King and, bearing in mind his unfortunate demise, John Buscema. It was fascinating to hear the likes of John Romita Sr. and Herb Trimpe discuss the Marvel Bullpen of the Sixties along with any other gossip that popped up. Did you know that Charlton were allegedly set up as a front for money-laundering gangsters? I might have heard this before, but my short term memory is shot to hell and it's always nice to be reminded.

As the afternoon wore on and the hours ran down, I trawled the hall handing out the remaining samples and proposals. Meeting up with some of the guys from Antarctic Press, we had dinner, and it was a nice way to finish the con off. Then, back to the hotel, bed, the airport and arriving back to the UK and sunny Hastings on Tuesday after a nullifying flight. I wanted and needed to sleep for a week.

Despite what I might have written in places, don't think that it wasn't well worth the trip. I don't regret a moment of it – even the Eisners, after all, are all part of the experience. It was probably for the best that this was my first year, quite simply because unlike artists and their portfolios, a writer can't just hand over a synopsis and say "What do you think of that then?". You need some sort of a C.V. and it's a Catch 22 situation, since without one, editors aren't likely to pay much attention to you. In effect, I suppose, you need to have already proved you can do it, instead of just talking about it. But it felt good, and now it's just a case of sitting by the phone and computer and wait for the offers to flood in.

Will I be going next year? I certainly hope so!

Cliff (no, not that one) Richards and Will Conrad, the art team on Dark Horse's Buffy the Vampire Slayer show off their work at SDCC 2002.

In complete contrast to Kevin Gunstone's San Diego report... The UK's small press convention is compact, cheerful and has a growing international reputation – it took place at its regular venue, the Oxford Union, on August 17 and 18. Ade Brown reports on the first day, Mike Kidson on the second...

Caption according to Ade

OXFORD has hosted the annual British small press convention for ten years. I have been to three of the last four, as an interested reader rather than a creator or publisher. And it is great.

More of a symposium* than a traditional comic con, there is a sense of collaboration, sharing of experiences and all out fun. Of course there is a chance to browse and buy the comics that you would otherwise have to risk trying via mail order or Internet preview; but the real benefit is that people meet others who are working in isolation to bring out the indie zines and comics.

Caption is usually structured around workshops and entertaining diversions, with an overall theme each year. This year was "Noir", with a view towards the pulp thrillers of days gone by. Past themes have included "Love", "Space" and "the Death of Comics". The latter was a theme that was revisited this year in the first panel, "Who Killed British Small Press Comics ?"

This was actually a lively, positive discussion, starting from the consideration that as we didn't actually have a body, perhaps there had been no murder. The panel consisted of Caption pioneer Jenni Scott, Shane Chebsey (whose *www.smallzone.co.uk* is a good place to find UK small press comics), Natalie Sandells (artist on Devilchild <*http://www.devil-child.co.uk/main.htm*), Phil Hall and Mike Kidson (who should need no introduction to Borderline readers). Natalie was a first time attendee, who was surprised to be invited onto the panel but still gave a good account of why the small press

Inside the Union: a lot of people enjoying the art auction which raised money for charity.

will continue. Several obstacles were discussed, from lack of visibility to lack of opportunity, but nothing deterred the audience, and several different solutions were put forward. No-one said "I know who killed British Small Press Comics and the murderer is in this room!" Possibly because the British Summer was put on hold, to give us some decidedly non-Noir sunshine, and we were sitting in the garden...

A few very important thoughts came from the discussions. This is not a collective of like-minded people who all do the same sort of comics. There are, increasingly, more ways to improve your comic's visibility. Perhaps, for some, commitment is limited by the fact that you have to earn a living. It occurred to me, as people commented about those who had got disillusioned with self-publishing, that the British Small Press wasn't dead, because those that had left had been replaced by new folks.

The tireless organisers Alex, Ruth, Jb, Tom, Gideon and Ian were a great team, keeping everything flowing and interesting. Sighted at the event were Al Davison (now self-publishing Spiral Dreams), D'Israeli (as always, willing to offer constructive advice to all), Antony Johnston (Rosemary's Backpack, coming soon from Cyberosia), Terry Wiley (Petra Etcetera et al.), Paul Gravett and almost the entire cast of Borderline. People travel from all over the country - further in the case of Malcy Duff <*http://www.bugpowder.com/gallery/ffrap1.html*> from Edinburgh, Ryan Richards from the US, and Jean-Paul Jennequin from France!

Later, there were talks by Jean-Paul (European Small Press), Tony Hitchman (San Francisco Underground) and Steve Marchant (a hilarious "role-playing" contest featuring Thor, Mr Fantastic & John Constantine). On Sunday, the traditional comics race took place, when three teams were given themes and methods to work to produce a comic in a limited time.

As I said, this was a chance to

get together (*symposium literally means "drink together"!) and learn from people with similar interests and experiences. I would recommend anyone involved in a small press comic (or thinking of it) to come to Caption 2003. Keep watching *http://caption.org*!

Caption according to Mike

AS Ade suggests, the great thing about Caption is that it's a people con. As exciting as an event like the American Small Press Expo (SPX) may be, it follows the customary convention model of setting up stalls and selling your wares, whereas that's a side issue at Caption. The focal point is always the bar, and not just for drinking - large sketch pads and numbers of pens, pencils and markers are placed on all the tables, so that people can sketch and even put together comics while chatting, drinking and just generally making and renewing connections. Panels and events may be organised, but again they often seem like side issues, there to give form and structure to the proceedings as much as anything else. Professionals attend, but they do so as part of the crowd. Most people who attend may produce their own comics – but there's absolutely no stigma attached to attendees who don't. Ultimately it's all about people with a creative interest in the medium coming together once a year to talk, exchange ideas and recharge their batteries with a dose of human contact with like-minded souls - something for which even email and Internet communication can only be a substitute.

That side of it is perhaps more evident on Sundays than it is on the Saturdays. Sunday is short – everything packs up around 5.00 pm, and thereafter anyone still in the mood usually repairs to the beer garden of the mediaeval Turf Tavern for further drinking and discussion. It's a day for relaxation, for saying goodbye to friends who are leaving early, for swapping those all important names and addresses – and when the weather's behaving and you can hang out in the Union's pleasant walled garden, it's a day for a comics enthusiast to feel that they're somewhere like home, and enjoy the closing hours of a time spent among friends or family. Hats off to the Caption organisers for setting up and maintaining such a stimulating and low pressure environment!

The only planned event for the day, Jeremy Dennis' workshop in which teams produced instant jam comics on the Noir theme, went with a bang - literally, since each team was provided with a variety of props including cap pistols! First, everyone involved contributed brief tag lines or concepts related to a series of plot points outlined by Jeremy; scribbled down, these were placed in a line of beer glasses to provide the basic working material for the comics. Each of three randomly chosen teams then picked one plot point from each glass and set about assembling them into coherent, or otherwise, stories, with props to enable team members to pose for the artists.

In fact, the props also aided Jeremy in keeping things light and cheerful, because there was a lot of intensive work going on; in about two hours three complete comics stories were produced! If it was a race, the team I was in finished first – but that could be because we were primarily writers, and didn't stop to think that we could use more than one sheet of paper. D'oh... One week later I have no idea whether our frighteningly compressed one-page saga of private duck detectives, lust, animal cruelty, satanic carnivals and Christian rodents actually makes any sense - although it was certainly grim, gritty and bleak...

I suppose I'll find out at Caption next year!

ANIMATED CONFECTIONEY

The adventures of Gutwallow, the intrepid gingerbread man, take him on a new quest - and to a new publisher. Borderline's *Mike Sivier spoke with creator Dan Berger about the title, and its move to Digital Webbing Press.*

WHAT could be stranger than a comic about a bunch of human-sized turtles with Italian names and Japanese fighting styles? For Dan Berger, former writer/artist of the **Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles** comicbooks, and Peter Laird, co-creator of the Turtles phenomenon, the answer turned out to be an animated piece of confectionery: **Gutwallow**.

Berger created gingerbread hero Gutwallow in the spirit of the popular syndicated TV series *Xena: Warrior Princess*, with elements of both comedy and drama. The comic depicts the character's adventures after he leaves the relative safety of his home - a dungeon - and discovers the wonders and horrors of the outside world.

The magical gingerbread man's origins have remained a mystery - but the new series of **Gutwallow**, to be released by Digital Webbing Press in December, reveals the beginnings of the courageous cookie.

Gutwallow's adventures were originally published by Numbskull Press - but the new series has been picked up by Digital Webbing. Gutwallow's companions, Leafale and J'Sika, are joining their leading man in the transition. Leafale, a mighty swordswoman, and J'Sika, a budding enchantress, are searching for their gingerbread friend - and find nothing but trouble along the way. Readers will also be introduced to Miyoki, sole survivor from a fox tribe that has been wiped out by minions of the evil wizard Garloff.

So who exactly is Gutwallow and where are we likely to have seen him before?

"Gutwallow is a gingerbread golem created by a white witch with the help of an ancient sorcerer," says Berger. "As far as golems go, Gutwallow is extremely autonomous, but he's not very wise to the ways of the world. As the stories progress, Gutwallow discovers how the world operates - much to his dismay."

Gutwallow has appeared in 16 issues of his own comicbook series from Numbskull Press, and in the anthology books **Son of Rampage** and **Brainbomb**. How did the strip come into being?

"Gutwallow was born of my desire to do an all-ages fantasy comic book, something that I really wanted to do ever since I discovered Jeff Smith's **Bone**," says Berger. "I first read Tolkien's **The Hobbit** at the age of 10 and I've been a huge fan of fantasy ever since. After several years of working on the **TMNT** 40-80 hours per week, I was suddenly faced with a lot of spare time when the **Turtles** comic strip was canceled in 1996 - so I decided to do

something that combined my love for fantasy with my devotion to comics. I did an eight-page **Gutwallow** mini-comic that I sold at an independent comic book show in Manchester, Vermont way back in 1995. Three years later I finally started self-publishing the **Gutwallow** comicbook itself."

He adds: "I really love what Jeff is doing with **Bone** and I felt that I could contribute something to the field as well, so here I am - still crazy after all these years."

Berger strives to make **Gutwallow** accessible to readers of all ages. But he admits that "Gutwallow is written primarily for adults. I only know what I like as an adult, so that's what I'm putting into my comic. Fortunately, lots of kids are enjoying the series. I won't remark on what that says about the level of my maturity!"

The new series, *Fury of the Furry*, definitely has an adult-themed side to it: "It's basically my allegory about what's going on politically in the world today. It's dark in tone, yet hopeful in the end. With any luck, that's how reality will work itself out as well."

Berger's enthusiasm for his plucky pastry is shared by others in the comic industry. "It's like **The Lord of the Rings** if it were done by Chuck Jones. The best thing about it is that it's just plain fun!", raves Stan Sakai, creator of **Usagi Yojimbo**. And Brent Frankenhoff, of *Comics Buyers' Guide*, agrees: "For light, enjoyable fantasy reading, this is an excellent choice."

Berger handles the writing and art chores on **Gutwallow**, with editorial assistance and lettering by **Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles** co-creator Peter Laird. "He's known for his accomplishments - which almost rival my own," jokes Berger.

***Gutwallow** #1,* Fury of the Furry*, debuts in December from Digital Webbing Press, priced $2.95. During the same month, a Gutwallow story also appears in **Digital Webbing Presents** #6.*

Dan Berger

DAN BERGER was born in (he thinks) Amherst, Ohio, in 1965. He grew up in the little town of South Amherst, Ohio and after graduating high school in 1983 spent a few months in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida at Bauder College. Returning to Ohio, he then spent about a year at Lorain Community College, taking art classes and playing foosball *[possibly better known to non-US readers as Table Soccer – Production Ed.]*. "I was better at foosball than art," says Berger, "but there weren't too many career opportunities in foosball, so I stuck with art."

From there, he spent five years at the Cleveland Institute of Art, beginning in 1985. "While at CIA, I met my great friend Ryan Brown, who would later, with help from Dean Clarrain, get me the gig at Mirage Studios."

In 1986, Berger self-published a comic book called **The Boogieman**. He says: "It was my attempt to do a comic in the flavor of a 1930s pulp adventure. Only one issue came out, as half the distributors filed bankruptcy right after **The Boogieman** appeared, and thus my profits were gone with them. Alas."

After graduating from CIA in 1989, Berger moved to Massachusetts. Unfortunately, the only job he could find was painting the interior of Peter Laird's house - but fortune smiled on him when Ryan and Dean got him a paying gig in comics, inking **TMNT Adventures** for Archie Comics.

"From there," says Berger, "I moved on to other projects at Mirage, including licensing art, toy design, issue #45 of the Mirage **TMNT** comic and the daily ***TMNT*** comic strip from Creators Syndicate. I went from inking the strip for a year to doing the whole thing by myself for about four years. It was stressful, to put it mildly."

The **TMNT** comic strip was cancelled in December 1996, and Berger began doing the Official Ninja Turtles Web Site [*www.ninjaturtles.com*] part-time in November of that year. He says: "I didn't do too much in '97 other than work on the Turtles site and develop **Gutwallow**, which took far longer than I'd anticipated. I had originally hoped to release issue one back in October of '97, but I was having too much trouble meeting my self-imposed deadline - something very familiar to fans of Mirage artists - so the date kept getting pushed back until, eventually, it came out in February of '98. I'm still doing the **TMNT** site as my day job, while I ply my skills on **Gutwallow** in the evenings - usually *late* into the evenings."

Peter Laird

PETER LAIRD was born in North Adams, Massachusetts in 1954. His interest in art grew into a passion at high school, when he discovered Jack Kirby's work on **The New Gods** and **The Demon**, along with other titles such as Barry Smith's **Conan**. In time he graduated from the University of Massachusetts with a BFA in Printmaking, and entered the professional world with a sincere desire to become a freelance illustrator and comic book artist.

After five years of struggling to attain this goal with some small successes, Laird's life was transformed by two significant events: first he met Kevin Eastman, then he met his future wife, Jeannine. The two events dovetailed serendipitously when Laird moved with Jeannine to Dover, New Hampshire, which happened to be just 20 miles away from Ogunquit, Maine, where Eastman was working at a lobster restaurant. Eastman and Laird formed Mirage Studios in the summer of 1983, and shortly afterwards created the **Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles** - the comicbook phenomenon that almost single-handedly spurred on the black and white boom of the mid-1980s.

Mirage Studios is currently located in Northampton, Massachusetts. Laird lives nearby, with Jeannine, their daughter and various dogs and cats, in a house that **Turtles** bought. He is currently writing and inking the new **TMNT** comic book series from Mirage Publishing, besides editing and lettering Dan Berger's comicbook, **Gutwallow**.

Digital Webbing Press

DIGITAL WEBBING [*www.digitalwebbing.com*], created by Ed Dukeshire, is a source of comprehensive information on comicbook-related websites. In addition to providing daily comics news and daily columns, DW is known for its "talent engine" - matching writers with artists, both amateur and professional.

Digital Webbing Press (www.digitalwebbing.net) derives directly from the talented creators who frequent the DW message boards. Its flagship title, **Digital Webbing Presents**, is an anthology of stories by both aspiring and established creators.

"I'm really happy that we're finally working together to bring readers an all-new **Gutwallow** mini-series," said Ed Dukeshire, Digital Webbing publisher. "Fans of **Bone**, **Usagi Yojimbo**, **Cerebus** and **Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles** should really enjoy this series."

For more information on Digital Webbing comics, visit the official Digital Webbing Press website: *www.digitalwebbing.net* .

CONTINENTAL DRIFT

Kevin Schomburg continues his search for the perfect graphic albums from around the world...

Licence to Kill

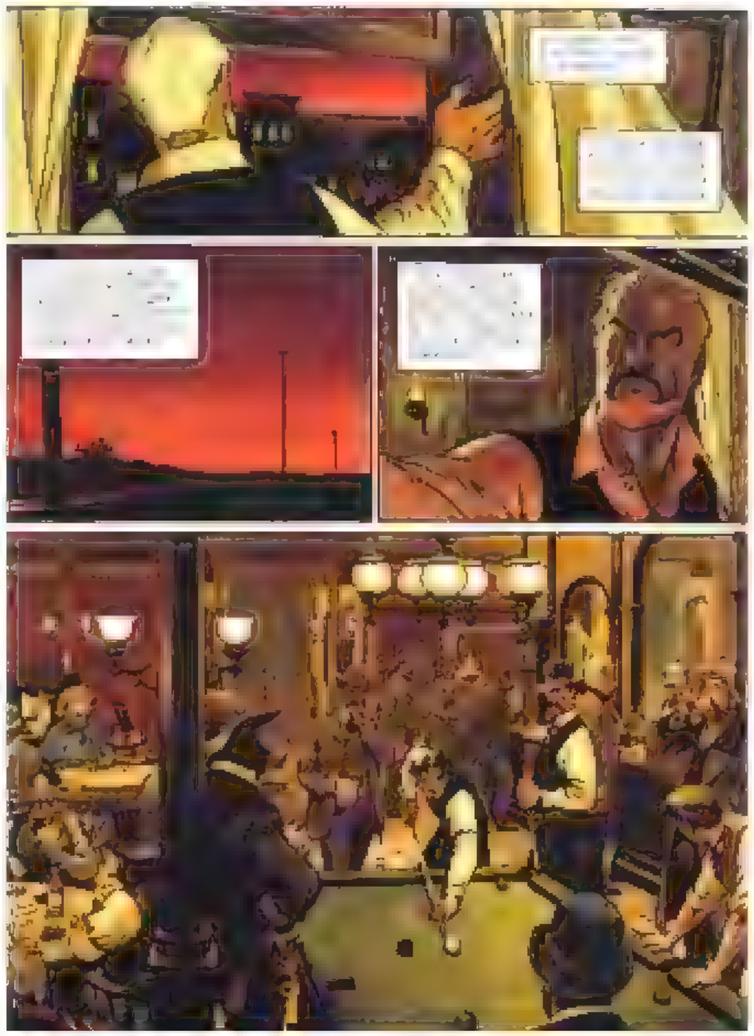
YOU'LL have read the news that Sean Connery will play the part of Allan Quatermain in the upcoming film adaptation of ABC's **League of Extraordinary Gentlemen**. Well, it isn't Connery's first contact with the world of comic books. In fact, he starred as the lead character in 1996's two-part western drama adapting **L'étoile du Désert** (The Desert Star) by Stephen Desberg and Enrico Marini.

Their French albums tell the story of Senator Matthew Montgomery, who travels westwards on a vigilant mission to avenge the death of his family. The trail of the killers leads him to the railroad companies on the western frontier, where life is lived by very different rules. The security and the law abiding civilization of Washington DC are traded for the harsh and wild reality of Kansas, where a completely set of different laws applies.

Much in the tradition of Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West*, Montgomery dives deep into this world of corruption and death. To find the killer and avenge the slaying of his family the senator himself has to cross the ultimate line - abandoning his humanity in a killing rage, he ponders why the logic of killing comes so naturally to humans when the passion is allowed to take the reins.

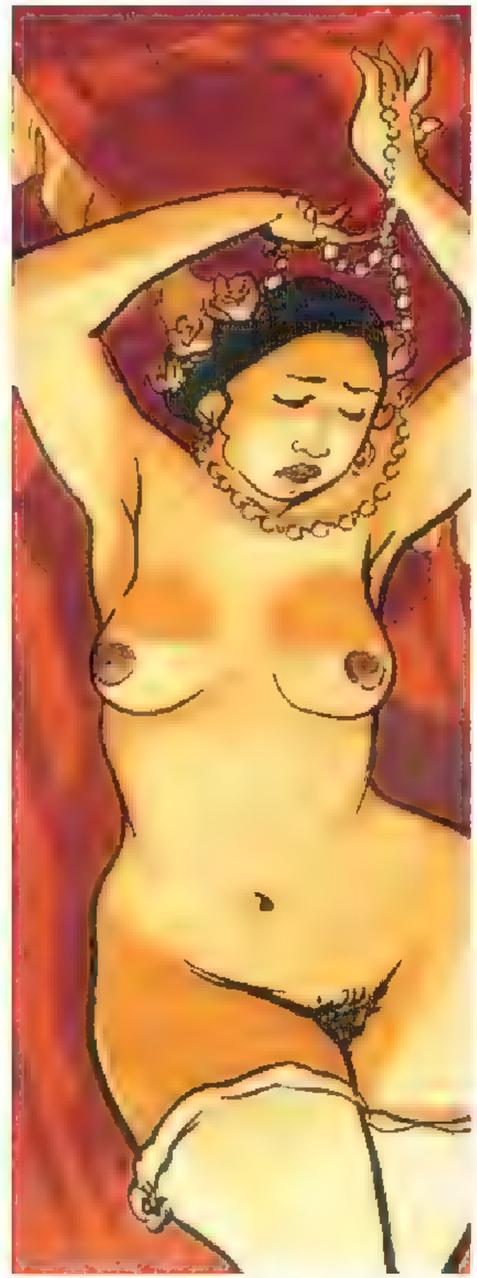
Desberg presents a simple story of revenge in the pages of **L'étoile du Désert**, although the inner monologues by protagonist Montgomery and antagonist Cauldray are a deeper pleasure to read. However, the true strength of the comic lies in the lavish paintings by Enrico Marini. Big in Europe for a quite some time now, Marini has been recently introduced to American readers in the pages of **Rapaces** (**Raptors**, published by NBM) and **Gipsy**.

Marini's art is truly beautiful to look at - and it reads very smoothly. His style is a colourful and clean presentation of an idealized movie-oriented western setting; much more like a Kevin Costner film than a Sergio Leone classic, it does not carry any of the grittiness which can be found in the pages of, for example, Jean Giraud's **Blueberry**. A fine match between Desberg's strong scripting and Marini's perfect storytelling is achieved. The idea of the clash of civilisations becomes clear - and at the same time you want to lick the pages for their beauty. A total lack of parsimony with the charms of female nudity may have something to do with that.



In the pages of **L'étoile du Désert** it becomes obvious yet again that it is the Franco-Belgian authors and artists who are the leading representatives of the western genre today. Also, they seem to possess an inherent understanding of the underlying drives in American culture, as has already been observed in the accounts of **Dixie Road, Saigon-Hanoi,** and Derib's work in **Borderline** issues 7, 11, and 12 respectively. Probably it's the potential for objective reflection only open to the outsider that can be held accountable for this.

Anyway, I always thought Richard Chamberlain was Quatermain…



L'étoile du Désert by Stephen Desberg and Enrico Marini is a two parter published by Dargaud for 12.60. Marini's work is published in America by NBM, who have yet to discover the album discussed above. They have also worked together on Scorpion, a swashbuckling adventure.

ISSUES

The Dark Carol Close Returns. Fans of Grant Morrison should look away now...

HA, HA, HA, HA, HA, HA, HA, HA. Apologies for the unusually mirthful start to this column, but I've just been reading an interview with Grant Morrison over at the Sequential Tart website. And it is rib-shatteringly, heart-explodingly, brain-bogglingly hilarious. Not, you understand, because Morrison has taken the time to prepare a dazzling array of witty one-liners with which to tickle our funny muscles nor because he's perfected a plethora of hernia-inducing shaggy dog stories. No, the interview is laugh out loud funny because it seems Morrison is incapable of talking anything other than utter bollocks. In fact, the man's pompous, self-aggrandising proclamations make the nonsense that dribbles like stagnant monkey spunk from the mouth of Bill Jemas seem totally rational and level-headed.

"I think most comics are pretty good and stand comparison with their equivalent TV shows or novels," says the Scrappy Doo-sized writer of New X-Men and The Filth. "Is The Ultimates as good as *West Wing*? I think so. In fact, I prefer it." Sorry Grant, but only a child or a complete nit would prefer yet another post-Watchmen, gritty superhero book to a superbly dialogued, tightly plotted, wonderfully researched ensemble piece like *West Wing*. True, Aaron Sorkin's drama is occasionally mawkish and a little too preachy at times, but there are single scenes in the show (like Martin Sheen verbally destroying a homophobic radio show host with quotes from the Bible) that pack more dramatic punch than *any* superhero comic has yet proved itself capable of, let alone the stylish but facile Ultimates.

It's both understandable and laudable that Morrison would want to proselytise in comics' favour, but I fail to see how making such lazy, silly statements does either him or the medium any good. On the whole, comics simply do *not* "stand comparison with their equivalent TV shows or novels". Is there a comic as beautifully written as *Six Feet Under*, *The Sopranos* or *Sex And The City*? No. Is there a comic as knicker-wettingly funny as *Phoenix Nights*, *The Office* or *Frasier*? No, again. Has there ever been a comics character created with one hundredth of the genuine menace of Irvine Welsh's Begbie? Nope - and anyone who says "Wolverine" is going to get their head kicked in. Has there ever been a comic writer as effective as John King or Helen Fielding at articulating the lives of, respectively, British working class men and metropolitan middle class women? No. And so it goes on. You say Brian Michael Bendis, I say James Ellroy. You say Alan Moore and Howard Chaykin, I say Alan Bleasdale and Russell T. Davies. You say Akira and Watchmen, I say *Our Friends In The North* and *Band Of Brothers*. You say Mark Millar and Warren Ellis, I say James Kelman and any novelist with an IQ above 75.

It might be a bitter pill to swallow, but the fact is that the best writers and creators don't choose to write American comicbooks as a first or, Brad Meltzer, Kevin Smith and J. Michael Straczynski apart, even a second choice. Whether it's down to the cash, a lack of interest on their part or simply that the medium is still perceived, often deservedly, as second rate, doesn't alter the fact. Furthermore, if comics are as good as Morrison claims, then why aren't more comics writers offered big bucks to pen TV shows, film scripts or novels? Even those who have been, with a couple of notable exceptions (Neil Gaiman being one), have fallen at the first hurdle or failed to get out of the starting blocks altogether. Alan Moore's first and so far only novel sold well amongst comic fans, but failed to pique the interest of anyone else. Frank Miller was drafted in to pen one of the *Robocop* films, only to see his script completely reworked by the time the movie made it onto the screen.

Grant Morrison (left) and Scrappy Doo (above)

Mark Millar was supposed to be working on a vampire TV series called *Sikeside* for Channel 4, which now seems to have fallen by the wayside. But, hold on, I hear you cry, X-Force's Peter Milligan has written for TV. Yeah, apparently he penned a few episodes of *Crossroads*, an appalling UK soap opera watched exclusively by menopausal housewives and students.

Even when moviemakers start sniffing around the comics industry, they're only after general concepts that they can shift about, break down and remould into something else. After all, how much genuine input into the film version of From Hell did Moore and Eddie Campbell have? Bugger all. The same goes for Max Allan Collins and Richard Piers Rayner on *Road To Perdition*. The attitude seems to be one of "We'll take the ideas, but you can keep the writers, thanks."

I'm not sure Morrison even believes his own argument, for much of what he says in the aforementioned and absurdly reverential Sequential Tart piece smacks of the frustration only a big fish in a small pond can suffer. "Because we bloody well deserve it," he blusters when asked why he thinks comics writers should be treated as rock stars, before adding: "I think comics people would clearly make better media interviewees than pop stars and footballers. It's a no-brainer. Spin us as the Beat Generation, as outlaw creators doing radical, poetic work in a fringe medium." It strikes me that Morrison is someone who craves widespread recognition, can't get it in comics, hasn't been invited to the TV/movie script party and is plenty pissed off about it. In fact, outside of the 100,000 readers of New X-Men, you might say he's Invisible.

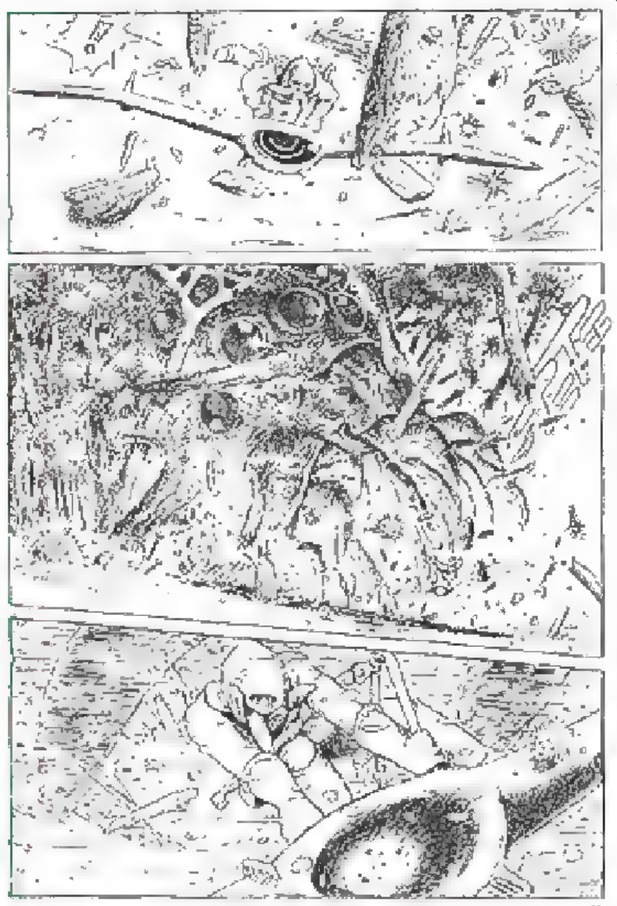
WHAT IS MANGA?

Kevin Hill looks at Nausicaä of the Valley of Wind.

Winds Of Change

IMAGINE if you will that Walt Disney produced comics - not just any comics, but glorious epics of stunning beauty. Now forget your imagination and consider it real, because someone does produce just that, and his name is Hayao Miyazaki.

You might recognise Miyazaki's name, as he was director of the cinematic extravaganza *Princess Mononoke*. So popular in Japan are his films that Disney licenced five of them, of which *Mononoke* was the first. Some critics would say that, with the dreadful release and lack of advertising *Mononoke* received, Disney merely did this to prevent Miyazaki's films from rivalling their own. The film was almost buried - most notably in the United Kingdom - preventing it from securing an audience that would make Miyazaki's name and films worthy of continued cinematic release.



But that is all by the by. What we're interested in is comics, and what we have from Miyazaki is one of his greatest creations. Be thankful for Viz Communications, be very thankful, for they brought us the ecological epic known as **Nausicaä Of The Valley Of Wind**.

As manga goes, **Nausicaä** runs fairly short, with the "Perfect Collection" running to four standard sized volumes. However, the quantity is not the question, and as the quality of **Nausicaä** rarely drops, you're in for a treat.

While **Nausicaä** is set on Earth, it is a future Earth, one plagued by products of mankind's destructive nature and misuse of the environment - the results being the Sea Of Corruption, a highly toxic forest that is slowly spreading across the world. The eponymous Nausicaä is a young girl, daughter to the chieftain of her tribe, who are based in a region known as the Valley Of Wind, which is protected from the deadly poisons.

A war that has been sparked between the kingdoms of Torumekia and Dorok disrupts the lives of Nausicaä's people, forcing her to become involved. Rather than pick a side Nausicaä seeks to end the hostilities, to prevent further destruction of the planet, and to save innocents from the hell that war will create.

Nausicaä is an inherently spiritual person, thanks to the teachings of her people and those of the master swordsman and adventurer Yupa - a highly respected figure throughout the kingdoms. This spirituality, which extends to her having a form of psychic ability and a oneness with the creatures and world around her, allows Nausicaä to see things from a different point of view from those responsible for the needless conflict - she has no need for power, and so has none of the trappings of greed that that need causes.

Although there is a lot to write about when it comes to the story of **Nausicaä**, it really is a book that requires discovering. It wouldn't be difficult to ramble on about the large insect-like creatures that populate the land, or about the giant living war machines referred to as God Warriors, but ultimately this would detract from your experience. And that's just what Miyazaki's works are all about: discovering and experiencing the lands and people he has formed.

In his writing, Miyazaki brings a humanity to his characters that is often missed in comics. Rather than have set stereotypes, he instead imbues each character with a personality of their own; whether they be strong-willed, or highly flawed, each character has unique attributes.

Although there are high levels of action in the story, **Nausicaä** isn't just another fast-paced story masquerading as a warning about ecological disaster - no matter the level of activity, it never detracts from what is, in effect, a morality tale.

A story as complex and epic as this would fail without great artwork to back it up. With a style that appears to owe as much to European art as it does to his Japanese comics forebears, Miyazaki's almost organic art jars when compared with the usually clinical look of most Japanese creators. Coupled with his cinematic mind's eye, his style allows for panels that are fluid, and rich in life. Each scene could, if you can imagine this, be a single frame from one of Miyazaki's films - he takes very few shortcuts and movement is rarely, if ever, reduced to speedlines.

To seek comparison with others, it would be advisable to look at the works of Moebius, or his European contemporaries. The worlds of **The Airtight Garage** or **Arzach** compete on equal terms with **Nausicaä**, all three being rich in life and vibrant with imagination. Regardless of your views on Japanese comics or cartoons, Miyazaki's work is nothing like you have ever seen - being more stunning, and maybe even more important to the medium, than even Otomo's masterpiece **Akira**.

With his other ecology-oriented story, *Princess Mononoke*, now available on DVD, the upcoming release of his next movie *Spirited Away*, and Viz's impending release of Miyazaki's own comics adaptation of it, this is possibly the best time to start discovering Miyazaki.

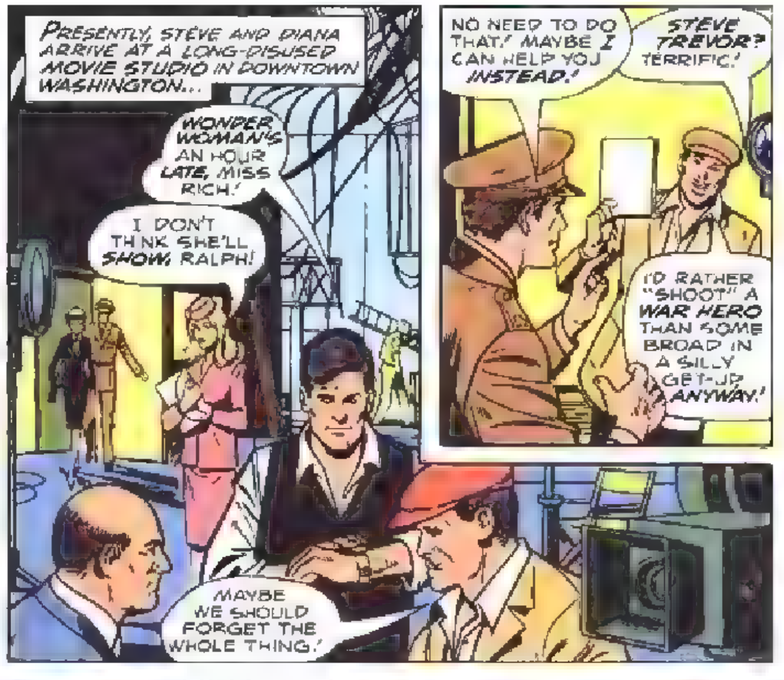
TRANSATLANTIC MEDITATIONS

Arnold T. Blumberg's been having a busy month...

I'VE read no less than three different columns written by three different authors - and in three distinctly different publications, would you believe - that focus entirely on the fact that the writers in question could not think of a topic for that month's column. I'm not kidding - eight hundred to one thousand words, give or take, on how they were right out of ideas. It takes the ego of a writer to settle on the notion that readers would naturally be thrilled to learn all about the ins and outs of the tortuous process of filling blank word processor files with something resembling weighty, well-structured essays... especially if that process doesn't amount to much more than griping about a dearth of subject matter.

I promise you, however, that this column is not about the absence of ideas. I was actually going to write a rather sage piece considering the bright spot on the horizon concerning the wider acceptance of the comic book medium indicated by the release of the recent Hollywood A-list feature film, *Road to Perdition*. I was going to talk about how many people don't even know that this grim-and-gritty gangster epic - touted by critics far and wide as a shoe-in for multiple Academy Award nominations - is based on a graphic novel by US writer Max Allan Collins and UK artist Richard Piers Rayner. I was going to discuss the fact that the film - starring such Tinseltown heavyweights as two-time Oscar winner Tom Hanks and one-time Oscar winner Paul Newman (logically making him half the actor that Hanks is, if you don't count Newman's "honorary" Oscar) - has brought an acclaimed comicbook novel to the screen with verisimilitude and panache, eschewing the usual super-spandex road that comics must usually take to reach another medium. I was planning to wax eloquent about how, rather than simply throwing another heroic saga with brightly-garbed crime-fighters up on the silver screen, *Road to Perdition* had shown the world that comics can also deal with "real world" subject matter (the recent *Ghost World* notwithstanding, of course) and how maybe - just maybe - the movie might convince anyone smart enough to make the connection that perhaps they should visit their local comic shop and see what the world of four-color funnies has to offer.

Yes, I was planning to do all of that, and then the Dreaded Deadline Doom of all Dooms hit me like a ton of remaindered copies of **DK2**. You see, while I devote a great deal of time to contemplating how best to communicate various aspects of the American comics scene to the readers of **Borderline**, that isn't all I do. Loath as I am to toot my own horn (... he says, even as he does just that), I also have the honor of serving as Editor for


PRESENTLY, STEVE AND DIANA ARRIVE AT A LONG-DISUSED MOVIE STUDIO IN DOWNTOWN WASHINGTON...
WONDER WOMAN'S AN HOUR LATE, MISS RICH.'
I DON'T THINK SHE'LL SHOW, RALPH!
MAYBE WE SHOULD FORGET THE WHOLE THING.'
NO NEED TO DO THAT.' MAYBE I CAN HELP YOU INSTEAD.'
STEVE TREVOR? TERRIFIC.'
I'D RATHER "SHOOT" A WAR HERO THAN SOME BROAD IN A SILLY GET-UP ANYWAY!

Gemstone Publishing, where we churn out **The Official Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide** every year. This year, as it happens, I'm also co-authoring **The Official Overstreet Comic Book Grading Guide** (Second Edition), and in fact, I'm feverishly writing that tome as we speak. Grading is without a doubt the most contentious aspect of the comicbook collecting business, so we face the Herculean task of encapsulating (an in-joke for anyone "in the know") everything you'd want to know about collecting into one handy, compact volume. As some less erudite Americans might say, it ain't easy.

But that's as may be. My real goal this time around was to point to films like *Road to Perdition*, and yes, *Ghost World*, as stepping stones on the way to a deeper understanding of the richness of the comicbook medium and widespread recognition of the endless storytelling possibilities that the artform affords us. Will we soon see feature film adaptations of comic book masterpieces like Spiegelman's **Maus**, Winick's **Pedro and Me**, Pekar's **American Splendor**, and Eisner's **A Contract With God**? Will moviegoers leave theaters across the United States, brush popcorn and nacho crumbs from their pants, and saunter into the nearest comic shop to demand copies of the original graphic novels? Will they discover that comics are not to be feared - not to be pigeonholed as merely the purview of little tykes – but are legitimate vessels of literary and artistic expression that can enlighten and entertain as well as any movie or TV show, if not better?

These were the kinds of issues I intended to explore in this month's column, but alas, I simply could not find the time to frame a cogent argument with everything else that's happened in the last few weeks. I'm left with the thinnest of premises and only a modest conclusion - that perhaps this might be seen as nothing more than an aberration. After all, *Spider-Man* made box office history and kept summertime movie mavens glued to their seats, while *Ghost World* faded quickly due to its art-house roots and *Road to Perdition* is already forgotten by all but the most effusive Oscar pundits. When it comes to adapting comic book material to the big screen, it seems American audiences are still only truly impressed by primary colors and big, bright explosions. The same superhero trap into which comics fell 60 years ago has ensnared their transition to film as well.

In the last few months alone, we've heard news about comic-based movie projects like *Spider-Man 2, Blade 3, Sub-Mariner, The Punisher, Hellboy, X-Men 3* (after *X-Men 2* comes out next year, of course), *Batman vs. Superman*, *Batman: Year One*, *Superman Lives*, and countless others. Notice a pattern? No Eisner graphic novels touted as 2004's big blockbuster event, no Cruse's **Stuck Rubber Baby**, no Kubert's **Fax From Sarajevo**... did I mention no Eisner? Even *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, while based on a comic that itself borrows heavily from Victorian literature, fits squarely in the mold of a "super-team" adventure story. All that's missing are the capes and tights.

Perhaps it's just the intense pressure that makes me sound so glum. Perhaps one day soon, we'll be seeing an endless parade of comic-themed films rolling out with nary a mask or chest symbol in sight. Personally, I think the chances of that are only Fair at best...or should that be Good Minus?

MILESTONES

Mike Kidson explores key moments in the history of comicbooks

What's in an Age?

HISTORY is an imprecise discipline at the best of times. Even using the "scientific" methods of the last half-century or so, each age tends to view the past in the light of its own particular zeitgeist. Then there's always missing information to be worked around, and the notion that 'history is written by the victors' to be contended with. As if such measures of inexactitude weren't enough, often enough one comes across instances of outright Bad History – hypotheses and models which remain in use even when they are clearly inadequate or even nonsensical. Fans of American comicbooks have one such model that has even become enshrined in the literature – that of the "Metallic" Ages of comics.

For those unfamiliar with it, this notion of classifying 'eras' in the history of American comics grew out of fan discussions during the 1960s and 1970s, and was primarily concerned with defining the change in comics that occurred when various publishers, primarily DC, began reviving and revamping their superhero characters during the latter half of the 1950s. Thus, the Golden Age of comics is said to begin with the first appearance of Superman, in 1938, and the Silver Age is regarded by many as beginning with DC's publication of **Showcase #4**, featuring a remodelling of the Golden Age hero The Flash, in 1956. Nowadays references to a Bronze Age, the comics of the 1970s, are common. And thereafter? Presumably there must be a thereafter, given that the 1970s are now about a quarter of a century away - but although fans jokingly refer to a Lead Age, a Pewter Age or what have you, no-one seems to have come up with a firm classification for more recent comics… as yet, anyway. A Platinum Age has recently become accepted, though, referring to anything published before Superman appeared – back to when is not quite clear.

The inadequacies of this model are so legion that it's hard to know where to start (indeed, when fans set about discussing them, they often find it hard to know where to stop!). Perhaps the first point to be made is that its classifications apply solely to superhero comics – and here comes that aforementioned point about each age tending to view others in the light of its own predilections. A hasty glance at the shelves of the average US or UK comic shop might indeed suggest that superhero comics are extremely important; but they weren't anything like as market-dominating during the periods referred to as the Golden and Silver Ages. Funny animal titles in particular, but also teen humour, romance, westerns, war and many other genres outsold the superhero

comics at most times between 1938 and the late 1960s, and were not at all affected by developments in 1956. If the superheroics were important, it's because American comics fandom developed primarily around appreciation of them rather than of other genres – and, of course, it's those fans who devised this system of classification!

But even if you choose to ignore all the many other kinds of mainstream comicbook that once existed in the USA and conclude that superheroes *are* the main item, the Ages don't make sense. When did the Golden Age end - with the appearance of **Showcase #4**? But the initial superhero boom had died out by 1949, and between then and 1956 a handful of DC's most popular superhero books struggled on against heavy competition on the newsstands, despite a few short-winded attempts by other publishers to revive the genre prior to 1956. So, what Age is 1949-1956? Or is it just an unidentified gap in history? And what of the fact that the company who made the most important contribution to the resurgence of the superhero, Marvel, didn't launch their first Silver Age superhero title until 1961? Even the beginning of the Silver Age is a matter of contention.

Trying to pinpoint the end of the Silver Age is perhaps an even more contentious venture, though. Was it when the price of comicbooks rose from 10 to 12 cents (late in 1961, which would mean that the Silver Age ended months before Spider-Man first appeared)? Or when numerous DC writers attempted to unionise in 1967 and were given no further work? Maybe when Marvel began publishing more than 8 titles a month (early in 1968)? Or perhaps it was the point at which Marvel's foremost series creator Jack Kirby quit and went to work for DC, in the summer of 1970… all of these dates, and more, have their adherents and are hotly defended by some and dismissed by others.

It should be painfully clear by now that as a talking point for fans of American comics the "Ages" may be a lot of fun – but as any kind of historical model they're hopelessly imprecise and impossible to define meaningfully. In semantic terms, they also suggest that the quality of the comicbooks has been progressively debased ever since the 1940s, which may or may not tell us something about the fannish perception of them. Yet while this appalling example of Bad History may have its every detail questioned, most readers accept its general principle without further thought, and many magazines, articles and books have been based on its hazy parameters. Why?

The only answer that makes sense is that the model has been given weight and credence because it's a useful and profitable tool in the buying and selling of old comic books. Exchanging sale lists and want lists was as much a part of early fandom as was an appreciation for the comics themselves, and the Ages combine those two interests neatly. If a book can be identified as "Golden Age", it may generally command a higher price than an average "Silver Age" book. And in the highly commercialised world of American comics, sale and resale value are perceived as being just as important as historical accuracy – indeed, they are seen by many as being determinants of historical significance. If history is written by the victors, then the victors here are the dealers, and the readers lose.

From the point of view of this column, that just goes to show that sometimes a milestone only tells you how far you are from nowhere.

THE BLANK PAGE

Chev's off on one again: this month, sexploitation...

MASTURBATION. Keep that in mind, we'll be back to it later.

Order

I was reading Diamond's most recent **Previews** catalogue when I had the idea for this month's column, and then a couple of interesting things happened. Firstly, the large American bookstore chain Barnes & Noble seemed to have developed an interest in opening a chain of comic and graphic novel stores; secondly, Chaos Comics filed for Chapter 7 bankruptcy.

Interesting times. To see why, you're going to need a copy of **Previews**; any issue will do, they're largely similar.

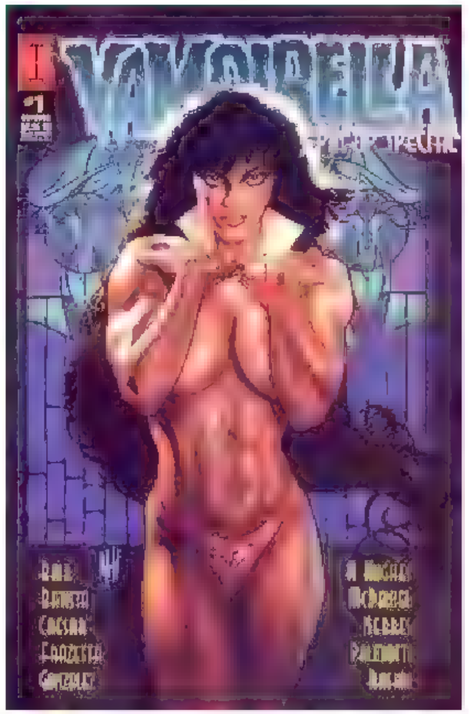
Flicking through the independent comics section, two things are immediately apparent. Many of the publishers featured are publishing comics that, despite relegation to secondary status within **Previews**, are what, in any other medium, would be considered mainstream entertainment. Comics created by small companies or individuals constricted within the direct market, with advertising budgets largely depleted by trying to gain notice within that market let alone outside it, are solicited within a catalogue monopolising the distribution of comics and overly concerned with promoting the generic product of larger, more established companies.

Most publishers no longer advertise through *Previews* through any exclusivity agreement, but because it's convenient to take advantage of Diamond's monopoly on the distribution of comics. Barnes & Noble would kill this at a stroke; it is a huge business well used to being able to order from many suppliers according to its whim and preference. If smaller distributors such as Red Route and Cold Cut (who are, after all, supplying the sort of mainstream comics a mainstream bookstore would prefer to carry) can offer better discounts and more reliable service than the complacent navel-gazing offered by Diamond, then they are suddenly in business in a big way, hopefully pulling many worthy independent comics publishers along with them while leaving the current status quo far behind in a hell of its own making. Diamond is a big fish in a little pond. But it may just be that some sort of global warming is about to happen to comics, and our pond is about to get a whole lot bigger. And the food chain will get longer, and Diamond won't be such a big fish anymore.

This is 21st Century Darwinism: Survival of the Biggest.

Chaos

Another obvious trait of the independents' section in **Previews** is that there is a preponderance of comics that display gratuitous female nudity on their covers. I'm



not singling out those that have female superheroes in skimpy costumes or anything up to and including **Vampirella**, for those have long been taken as givens within the industry. But a cursory glance at the product of such publishers as Avatar, Basement, Broadsword and Chaos - amongst others - reveals a style of cover that has been heavily influenced by, if not swiped from, pornographic images. *Previews* doesn't present itself well for a monthly catalogue ostensibly used as a showcase for all the industry has to offer, particularly to a nationwide chain of stores used to selling books on their literary merit and popularity, as opposed to sexual misconceptions pandering to the underdeveloped mind.

While Avatar seems to have gained the patronage of Warren Ellis and Garth Ennis (neither doing anywhere near their best work), and Sirius produces many other excellent works, many of their comics remain T & A books, churned out month after month, not story- or character driven but art-based and aimed at the lowest common denominator.

I'm sure these publishers are very proud of their work, and doubtless there are many individuals buying it, but they remain publishers of dubiously intended comics that have uncertain literary merit beyond that of the one-handed variety. Nobody wanted cover enhancements, or museum editions, or variant covers. And now nobody seems to want comics disguised as wank mags. Apparently, real wank mags are published for just that very purpose, so maybe comics could be about story and character, education and entertainment?

Perhaps they could learn a lesson from the demise of Chaos Comics and from the diversification into more literary comics as exemplified by Avatar and Sirius, and adapt and survive to what may be a sea change in the industry. Their audiences are growing up and dwindling, finding that acting like a mature adult and engaging in proper relationships and real sex is infinitely preferable to yanking oneself off to yet another nude variant cover of **Lady Death** or **Cavewoman**.

These are 20th Century comics: extinct.

Balance

Already it's being postulated that a corporation like Barnes & Noble selling comics will impact on the direct market-fed comics shops. Certainly these large chains cripple and kill off smaller independent bookstores wherever they appear in competition. That will certainly happen to some small comic shops. Larger chains may be able to weather the storm, as will any single store willing to work for its customers' money and support. For books, this battle was a sacrificial one, but was stalemated because consumers want different things from their suppliers and for every customer that prefers a huge, impersonal Barnes & Noble, there will be another who wants to visit a dusty little bookshop for that personal touch. But comic shops, as well as comics publishers, might benefit from a culling; too many are complacent in their closeted universes, with a dependent fan base and the one-stop convenience of Diamond's stranglehold on distribution.

Imagine comic shops pulled up by their bootstraps, and forced into being like a bookstore: clean, friendly, efficient and located somewhere more accessible than the outskirts of town. Imagine a store holder who can source you what you want from places other than Diamond, and have it within a week instead of sometime later in the quarter. Imagine what could happen to comics when 99% of people could see them available as literature and entertainment, rather than as ghettoised collectibles for the socially discarded.

As for masturbation: metaphorically there were many references in the above. If that didn't do it for you, maybe you could buy a copy of **Purgatori** to sort yourself out.

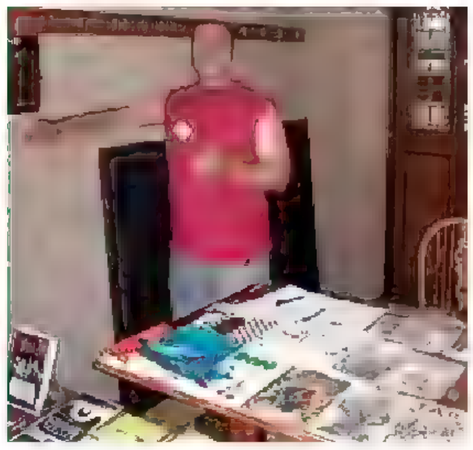
Click on Globe returns to contents

12 O'CLOCK LOCK

This month Selina Lock asks who, if anyone, killed the British small press comics scene?

THIS month 12 O'Clock Lock reports from Caption 2002, which was held in the historical surroundings of the Oxford Union building in Oxford's city centre. Where the USA has a number of different events celebrating small press, each with their own distinct personalities, Caption is the only major small press comic convention in the UK, so it's just as well it's a good one. Each year, Caption adopts a theme to bring a little order to proceedings. This year was Noir, which led to a wonderful display of little black books by the usual suspects, auctioned for a worthy cartoon charity, as per Caption tradition.

Part of the event that I enjoyed tremendously was one of the panels entitled "Who Killed British Small Press?", somewhat provocatively given that the majority of the attendees were small press creators, although each with their own reasons for working in the form. A consensus was eventually reached that the small press wasn't dead, just hiding in another country under an assumed name. Which it might as well be, as most people in the UK, even those who regularly visit comic shops, are unaware that it exists.

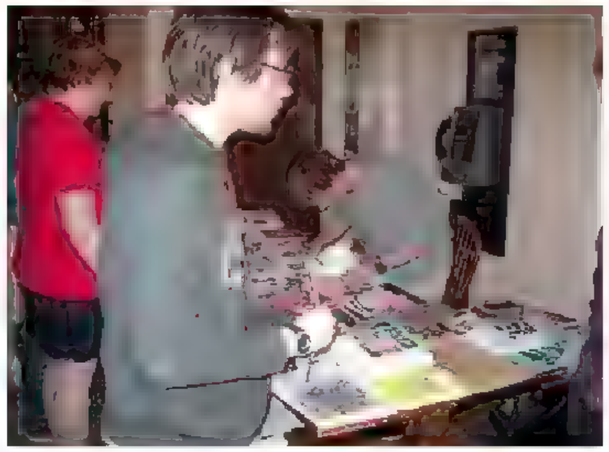


Some argued that this is the point of small press; it has limited appeal and often revolves around a local area, holding little interest for people outside a specific clique. Other creators argued that they self-published to allow themselves creative freedom but they still wanted the largest possible audience they could get for their work.

The issue of presentation was raised with European small press comics being exhibited as a good example of how standards differ from country to country. In Britain, the default for a small press comic is a black and white, photocopied production, whereas in many places in the rest of Europe, they would strive for full colour production on good quality paper. Examples were cited of comic marts where customers would happily browse through box after box of Marvel and DC back issues, but their eyes would glaze over as soon as they saw a black and white small press comic. Others argued that although presentation would put some customers off, it would actually attract others - mainly those who liked to think of themselves as part of a counter-culture, such as students.

Debate over production quality ultimately led on to a debate over the quality of the writing and artwork of the small press comics currently available. One sticking point was the question of how you are supposed to determine the quality of a small press comic: do you measure it against the full colour superhero comics that dominate the American and UK market? Against the black and white manga of Japan? Against the full colour European albums? Against some imagined idea of what a perfect comic should be? In the end, the answer is a personal one, wholly dependent on the tastes of the individual. The strength of the small press scene is its diversity: that it can be used to experiment, with art styles that clash with current fashions in the mainstream, and stories that aren't reliant on a fight scene every three pages.

Taking it further, the question was raised as to whether the UK scene was diverse enough. Was it as innovative as it could be? Was it pushing the medium in new and different directions? Certainly there was a range of products available from the Caption creators table, from the The Dust, measuring 77mm by 50mm - a full colour mini-comic about gangster fairies by Karen Rubins [*www.kazmantra.co.uk*], packaged with a magnifying glass, to Caption mainstay Jeremy Dennis' 12 panels per page, black and white Black Butterflies - an unusual murder-mystery.



One thought-provoking suggestion discussed was that the British small press could be killing itself by defining itself as small press. Small press in America, for example, can mean anything from a one-off mini-comic, made and distributed from the creator's bedroom, to professional publications from Oni Press, or any other small independent publisher, and there are several large conventions, such as APE, SPX and MOCCA, dedicated to non-mainstream material. In the UK we have Caption, attended by under 100 people, most of whom are small press creators, with a few who stride between professional and small press projects, such as D'Israeli, Woodrow Phoenix and Ed Hillyer.

In the end, though, does it matter whether we are classed as small or large, or how big the print run is? We're still making comics, even if they don't get into *Previews* or comic shops, or even into print. The Internet gives us a the chance to get to a bigger audience than ever before. But then, since you're reading this in Borderline, you knew that one already...

12 O'Clock Lock will return in Diamonds Are Forever.

MAN ON A MISSION

Martin Shipp's vision of a better comics industry...

THERE was a poll recently. I dare say it was one of those slightly-fixed polls, where a chap with a slightly-off but slightly-reassuring Scots accent, or maybe a warm Southern Irish burr redolent of peat cottages and shillelaghs, phones you with no warning on a Sunday afternoon and asks whether you'd rather vote for a goatbotherer or a wifebeater, and before you know it there's an entire petting zoo in government.

This poll claimed to reveal, expose and otherwise lay bare the favourite animated cartoons of those who had either been roused from post-prandial Sunday slumber or who had waded through many, many heavily-illustrated web pages in order to express their preference. I can't for the life of me remember what won, but the final list was the usual thing; a few classics, a few not-so-classics and one glaring irregularity, lacking in anything approaching class, but popular and of the moment and thrown in to attract the interest of the young people (a tactic officially known as "Robbie Williams").

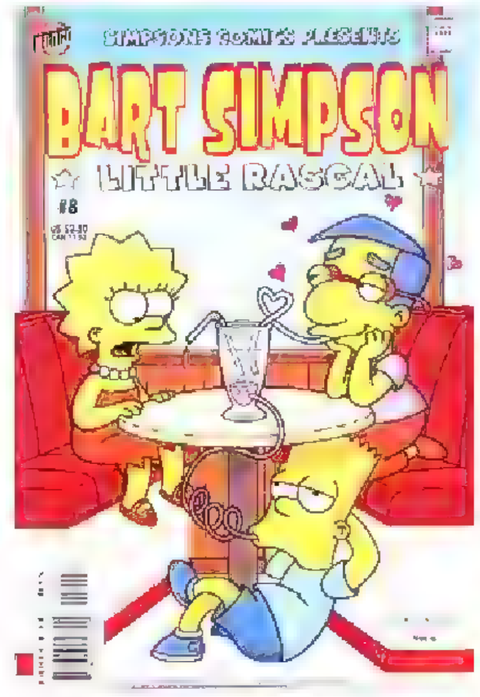
When I read about this in the arts pages of a serious broadsheet newspaper, I immediately thought "Where's the Tex Avery?" Then I thought: "Why is this list being given serious coverage in the arts pages of a serious broadsheet newspaper? Surely cartoons, with their impossible antics, their inherent need for the viewer to suspend disbelief and their population of cats with frying-pan-flattened heads, are solely for the entertainment of children or the feeble-minded?" And then I thought: "And aren't comics the same? And aren't comics treated with disdain and contempt and very, very unlikely to ever see a list of their finest achievements mentioned in the arts pages of a serious broadsheet newspaper?"

The difference is that I am wrong. Cartoons are not simply or solely seen by the general public as being for children. For every *Pob* there's a *Simpsons*, for every *Spongebob Squarepants* a Hanna/Barbera/Quimby *Tom And Jerry* (oh, to spend just one more Saturday teatime delighting in *Bowling Alley Cat*), for every Mike Judge a Norman Maclaren. The greater world of Art, as in that stuff covered by the serious broadsheet newspapers, accepts animation as a serious artform. The people, as a whole, embrace cartoons as the great and good things they are. One of our television channels dedicates great swathes of airtime - not in prime time, I admit, but great swathes nonetheless - to showing the best of modern animation. The late, great Chuck Jones (although you have to say that *his* Tom & Jerrys were a bit… *soft*) received the accolade of having an entire hour-long programme of the BBC's flagship arts show dedicated to him. Such is the respect dedicated to animation, such is our exposure to it, that if you were to throw a stone into a crowd of people on the street, you'd probably hit someone who at the very least could tell you, if asked, the name of the telephone operator in *Hong Kong Phooey*.

So why is it, then, that one artform is raised shoulder-high and feted as heroic, while another - our own - is treated like the malformed cousin in the attic? The only things I can think of are that animation struck lucky, and that comics protested too much. Animation, being, as one would expect, moving images, came to life parallel to and in tandem with the great 20th century artform, cinema. As the magic lantern show became the picturehouse became the multiplex, the cartoon was almost *forced* into the general consciousness; the eight-minute cartoon was an ideal bill-filler, being cheap, entertaining, and capable of being endlessly re-run. As television gained its clawhold in the world's heart, the cartoon filled much the same purpose again; cheap filler that could be slotted into any gap yet left the audience feeling they'd been genuinely entertained.

Comics, on the other hand, although the other great 20th century artform (despite their earlier origins which my colleague Mr. Kidson is relating so charmingly), were inextricably linked with an activity that continued to wane over that time: the art of reading. Where cartoons could be passively enjoyed, comics required active acquired skills. Where cartoons were hitched to the thrill of cinema, comics were bound - for the majority of the public - to the doomsayer that was the daily newspaper.

Animation, probably because of its almost constant presence in the lives of anybody with access to a television, a cinema, or a computer, has effortlessly become A Genuine Art. Comics, though, have become a faded memory for far too many people. Which, maybe, is why the medium has to keep reminding people of its status. It waves its arms and jumps about, yelling at the top of its voice "Look at me! I'm an artform, I am! I'm serious, me!" while the public look politely away. This isn't helped by the repeated fact that while the major animation studios are only too happy to try out new styles and new formats, the major comics publishers, even when the politely-turned-away public take a look - *especially* when they do -



turn out the same old formats and the same old characters. It's a little like seeing a small and ill-behaved child promising he'll perform Mozart, then dropping his pants and farting. You know it's bound to happen, but you still feel so disappointed when it does.

Ah, you say, but isn't there a point where the different media cross over, in a great big simile concerning a Venn diagram? Aren't there an enormous amount of comics-based animations and animation-based comics? Yes, there are. Unfortunately these don't help matters. The animation-based comics sell in relatively small amounts (and yes, I'm well aware that Diamond's sales figures don't include newsstand sales of the Cartoon Network books, or the Batman Animated comics). And the comics-based animations… Have *you* ever sat through an entire episode of *Spider-Man And His Amazing Friends*?

COMICS 2040

IT'S NEW COMICS DAY IN THE COMIC COLLECTORS RETIREMENT HOME.

I LOVE NEW COMICS DAY! IT'S MY FAVOURITE DAY OF THE WEEK!

DID I EVER TELL YOU THAT, WHEN I WAS A BOY, I THOUGHT I COULD BE PERFECTLY HAPPY IF I GOT LOCKED IN A CELL FOREVER JUST AS LONG AS A NEW COMIC ARRIVED DAILY!

WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT THAT, ONE DAY IN EFFECT, YOUR DREAM WOULD COME TRUE?

HEY! CHECK THIS OUT!

THE COVER TO THE LATEST HULK!

MY GOD! IT LOOKS LIKE SOME ONE DREW ALL OVER IT!

WHAT IS IT WITH MARVEL THESE DAYS?

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO DOING A STRAIGHT DRAWING OF THE HULK SMASHING STUFF UP?

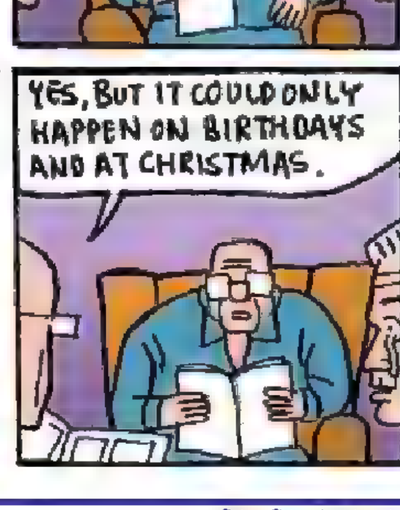
HOW DO YOU KNOW IT'S A COPY OF THE HULK? THERE'S NO LOGO!

IT'LL SAY IN THE COPYRIGHT BOX ON PAGE THREE

WAIT A MINUTE! THIS ISN'T THE INCREDIBLE HULK, IT'S THE LATEST OF DARE-DEVIL!

BLIMEY! DAVID MACK IS REALLY LETTING HIS STANDARDS SLIP!

HEY! CHECK THIS OUT! THE FIRST ISSUE OF THE NEW AQUAMAN SERIES!



REALLY? WELL I'VE GOT HERE ISSUE 36 OF THE PREVIOUS SERIES, WHICH CAME OUT TODAY, AND IT SAYS HERE ...

...THAT ISSUE 37, OUT NEXT MONTH, IS THE LAST ISSUE!

ARE YOU TELLING ME THAT DC ARE RE-LAUNCHING THEIR MAJOR CHARACTERS IN ON-GOING BOOKS BEFORE THE OLD ONES HAVE FAILED? TALK ABOUT DEFEATIST!

THAT WAS FANTASTIC!

WHAT WAS?

THE LATEST ISSUE OF CAPTAIN AMERICA!

WHEN DID YOU READ THAT? I DIDN'T SEE YOU READ THAT!

JUST THEN. IT DIDN'T TAKE VERY LONG.

I'M WAITING FOR THE TRADE

YOU CAN'T DO THAT! YOU HAVE TO BUY THE SINGLE ISSUES!

WHY? NOTHING EVER HAPPENS IN A SINGLE ISSUE AND THEY ONLY TAKE 30 SECONDS TO READ! AT LEAST THE TRADES ARE A BIT MORE SUBSTANTIAL.

YEAH, BUT IF NO ONE BUYS THE ON-GOING BOOK THEN THERE WILL BE NO ON-GOING BOOK TO COLLECT THE TRADES FROM!

SO, I SHOULD BUY THE SINGLE ISSUES?

YES, AND THE TRADES! THAT WAY YOU CAN LEND THEM TO FRIENDS WHO DON'T NORMALLY READ COMICS

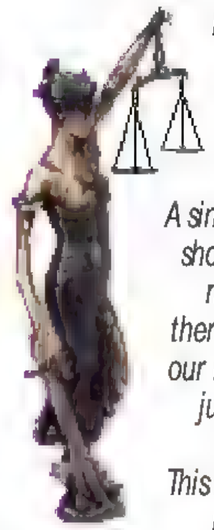
BUT YOU'RE THE ONLY FRIENDS I HAVE AND YOU ALREADY READ CAPTAIN AMERICA!

IMAGINE HAVING A TRADE PAPERBACK SLIPPED UNDER YOUR CELL DOOR. THAT'D BE GOOD, WOULDN'T IT?

YES, BUT IT COULD ONLY HAPPEN ON BIRTHDAYS AND AT CHRISTMAS.

Click on Globe returns to contents

VERDICT COMICS REVIEWS



Borderline's policy is that we don't mark a comic out of ten or some other archaic method of rating. A single comic or a series should be judged on a number of things, therefore we encourage our reviewers to make a judgement about a specific issue. This is why Borderline's review column is the best in comics!

THIS MONTH'S JURY:

David R. Booth (DRB)
Andrew Cheverton (AC)
Kelvin Green (KG)
Phil Hall (PH)
Kevin Hill (KH)
Rol Hirst (RH)
Mike Kidson (MK)
Nigel Lowry (NL)
Neil McOnie (NM)
Andy Winter (AW)

HAVE YOU GOT A VERDICT ON A BOOK? YES? THEN BORDERLINE WANTS YOU!
HAVE YOU GOT THE STONES TO JOIN OUR REVIEWS JURY? ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS CONTACT ANDY WINTER:
reviews@borderline.mediahall.co.uk FOR DETAILS AND OUR GUIDELINES.

100% #3
Vertigo
By Paul Pope

I'm assuming that the "graphic movie" tag on the front cover is meant to describe the style of the story - it's a brave idea, and one Pope manages to pull off. There appear to be three love stories happening at once - two of burgeoning love, and one of love lost. It really is movie-like, with Pope exploiting camera angles and pacing, and if I were to liken this work to others, they'd invariably be European or Japanese - this just doesn't seem like an American comic.

The only shame is that Pope has felt the need to include so many awful sound effects that look out of place and distanced from the artwork.

The Verdict: It's Pope. You love him or hate him artwork-wise, but this is a good story. (KH)

2000AD #1301-1305
Rebellion
By Various

So, how has 2000AD's "summer offensive" fared thus far? Well, they brought back *Rogue Trooper*, but we'll get to that later.

I find myself pleasantly surprised by the return of *The VCs*, as it is perhaps the most impressive strip in the comic at the moment. Henry Flint is one of the best artists in comics, and since Chris Blythe is the best colourist in the business, this strip really couldn't look any better. The big surprise is Dan Abnett, who has avoided his usual problem of writing shallow inconsequential strips, and has infused *The VCs* with a good sense of drama and excitement. The character work is superbly done, and the plot is engrossing.

The other highlight is *Bison*, a clever twist on the mistaken identity plot, set in a vividly realised cyberpunk world. There is an unshakable sense that this strip will fall foul to a rushed ending, but hopefully that will not be the case. The writing is strong, with well-realised characters, a surprise considering their basis in detective genre stereotypes. The art is also very good, with a dynamic, yet minimalist look.

Judge Dredd is, as ever, quite variable in quality. The recent strips, however, have been at the higher end of the scale. Beginning with a poignant tale concerning Dredd's human side and how it conflicts with his job, and ending with a fun pastiche of classic Ealing film comedy *Passport To Pimlico*, the most recent *Dredd* strips have been at the very least entertaining, which is in itself high praise. Also notable is the fact that the recent strips have had some depth; in other words, they've actually been about something. Too often, 2000AD strips, particularly *Judge Dredd*, are somewhat vacuous, and the level of reader enjoyment is directly related to that. Happily, this is not the case so far this summer.

Not everything is happy in 2000AD-land, however. Perhaps the biggest event of the summer re-launch is also the biggest disappointment. Despite very strong black and white art from Staz Johnson - similar enough to the original artists' style to please the old guard but with enough of a modern twist to keep it fresh - and decent writing from Gordon Rennie, the new *Rogue Trooper* series lacks excitement. As the editors of both 2000AD and the Megazine have admitted many times leading up to the re-launch, *Rogue Trooper* fell apart after the original series ended. This would appear to be the problem here too, and the strip feels like it is just going through the motions, especially with the recent "Rogue will die soon if we don't help him" plot, which fails to generate any excitement as we know he'll survive to the end of the series. The result is a competent but very dull strip, and something of a failure for the 2000AD summer campaign.

Disappointing as *Rogue Trooper* is, though, it is nowhere near as bad as the ill-advised resurrection of *Strontium Dog*. Both writer John Wagner and artist Carlos Ezquerra seem to have lost the magic touch that made the earlier adventures of Johnny Alpha so enjoyable. The art looks tired and crude, while the writing seems to have had no effort put into it at all, being a fairly clichéd sci-fi story that has little relevance or connection to the Strontium Dog universe. The reader feels as lost as the characters in the strip, as the plot goes nowhere at a frustratingly plodding pace.

So, in answer to my own question, the "summer offensive" has gone fairly well. The majority of the strips are good - but it is a slim majority, and with the quality of *Judge Dredd* being as variable as it is, it's an uncertain one.

The Verdict: A mixed start to the summer for this ever-entertaining anthology. (KG)

Avengers United #17
Panini Comics/Marvel UK
By Various

More reprinted adventures with Marvel's big-budget super-team. The excellent Avengers Forever

gets into its time-hopping stride, and Yellowjacket makes his first manic appearance in the classic reprint.

There is excellent art throughout from Carlos Pacheco and Jesus Merino, and John Buscema and George Klein respectively. The writing is excellent in the most recent strip, as Kurt Busiek and Roger Stern make a largely successful attempt at doing a Marvel version of Crisis On Infinite Earths.

The classic strip is less satisfying, with a truly bizarre conclusion which just manages to stay on the right side of senseless. The 1960s tradition of having fight scenes replace plot becomes a little tiresome in this issue, as there is really no reason for it. Those problems aside, the strip is a good one, with John Buscema's dynamic style contributing much of the quality.

Overall, this is still an excellent purchase at just over £2, even if you have one or two of the featured strips. The reprinting is high quality, and the classic strips are a wonderfully cost-effective way of plugging gaps in any Avengers collection.

The Verdict: Three average-to-very good stories for the price of one makes this irresistible value for money. (KG)

Bone # 48
Cartoon Books
By Jeff Smith

At this point, it's pretty hard to say anything new about Jeff Smith's fantasy series... this is yet another issue of encroaching doom, besieged townsfolk and scheming former mayors of Boneville. The series is now in its final stages with only seven issues remaining, and by now anybody even remotely familiar with it knows what to expect.

For newcomers, it is an odd series to start reading at this point... although some humour remains, the whimsy of the early issues has now been replaced by dark intrigue and foreboding as old alliances begin to crumble in the face of an ancient, invading enemy. Smith remains coy with his details, presenting tantalising hints of what has happened in the long ago past, what is happening now and where the characters are heading. While the quality remains high, by this stage readers should know more and issue after issue of intrigue with little progression is getting a little tiresome.

The Verdict: Good, but sadly humdrum... a little more oomph please, Mr Smith! (NL)

The Castaways
Absence Of Ink Comic Press
By Rob Vollmar and Pablo G. Callejo

Originally serialised in the Absence of Ink Theatre, this story concerns Tucker Freeman, a young white boy in 1930s America. His absentee father has left to "ride the rails" in search of work, leaving his family in the dubious care of his sister, "The Widow". Unable to feed all the mouths in her care, The Widow tells Tucker plainly that he must leave the farm and ride the rails like his father in order to seek his fortune. It's not too long before Tucker meets up with Elijah Hopkins, an old black hobo who takes pity on the poor boy and determines to see him right.

Despite the darker overtones, this is an almost gentle, whimsical tale, with a sense of camaraderie that evokes such movies as *Driving Miss Daisy* and *Stand By Me*. The tone and setting all feel authentic, as do the characters and their motivations. Certainly the ending is predictable, but that doesn't prevent it from being the *right* ending for this particular story.

Fantastic Four #60
Marvel
By Mark Waid and Mike Wieringo

I was surprised that Mike Wieringo could turn in such a good job on a title that I feel needs a strong artist to really be able to portray The Thing the way he should be. His artwork reminds me of all the best parts of Arthur Adams and all the innovative parts of these animated series artists; the ones who did the Batman animated comics a few years ago. I was actually surprised at how well he handled the work. His weak spot appears to be the Human Torch, but give the man some time, I'm sure he'll grow into it. From an artistic standpoint this is the best the FF has looked since Carlos Pacheco was in charge (which isn't long ago, I know, but we expect quality from the World's Greatest Comics Magazine!)

Unfortunately, that's where it stops being a great comic. Had Mike Wieringo not been such a class act then this could quite easily have turned into one of those definingly Bad Moments in Comics History, as bad as Will'o the Wisp or Rocket Racer from the Amazing Spider-Man's darkest '70s disco days. Obviously Marvel thinks that Mark Waid is still the hip and trendy guy to drag some of their books kicking and screaming into the 21st Century. WRONG! He drags them kicking and screaming into 1970s New York, he just changes the language to slightly more modern day - but the upshot is the same. The Thing chillin' wid the boyz, lissnin' to the sounds of da streetz and... are you embarrassed by this yet? That's just about as bad as this comic gets. A place where the streets of New York are so lovely and fluffy and cuddly that even the baddest mofos in the 'hood "got a sting like The Thing". God...

If people like Fabian Nicieza and Scott Lobdell are no longer worthy of prime comics jobs, what the hell is Mark Waid doing to keep himself financially healthy? He obviously isn't spending a lot of time writing comics on the evidence of this poorly realised rehash of old ideas.

The Verdict: This really could be done better by an infinite number of chimpanzees sitting in Alan Moore's shed. I don't know if all those chimps could afford Mike Wieringo, though, and he almost elevates this comic into the "It's worth nine cents" category. Oh, did I forget to mention it's only nine cents? Don't let that tempt you. (DRB)

The art rarely breaks from a three-tiered structure, lending a standard pace to the comic. It's very attractive and capable art; the inking could almost be called loose and scribbly if that didn't make it sound as if it weren't neat and exact. This is greatly enhanced by the colouring style, which has a wonderfully uniform blue tone to lend depth to the art and white highlights that add an incredibly rounded look to every person and object.
The Verdict: A fine package in all departments, offering a mature, emotional story for the price of two superhero slugfests. (AC)

The Filth #3
Vertigo
By Grant Morrison and Chris Weston

Er... well, I think most of this issue deals with another branch of pan-dimensional police force The Hand, this one dedicated to policing the pages of comics. That's right, it's metafiction time, as Morrison gives us a day in the life of the group who keep superhero comics clean by literally entering them. This works quite well, and provides some fun moments, such as the superhero splattering himself on the Fourth Wall as he pursues the continuity police. Chris Weston draws the superhero bits well, and adds some nice touches such as the four-colour sludge that sticks to the metafictional agents' boots as they leave a page. That said the contrast between the worlds might have been more effective had Weston used a different art style to illustrate the superhero world. There is some evidence of a streamlining of his usual detailed style, but it is not quite enough.

It is not entirely clear whether this is a new story arc, or a continuation of the previous one, but the subplot (or maybe it is the main plot) of Ned Slade, reluctant secret agent, continues in an interesting fashion. His struggle to rejoin "normal" society is portrayed very well by the creative team, who produce a lonely and dark, but probably accurate, depiction of "real life."

The hilarious Communist chimp assassin makes another welcome appearance, but Morrison's rather distasteful Christopher Reeve reference dampens things a little. All in all, though, this is still an excellent, if annoyingly impenetrable, series.
The Verdict: I still have very little idea what's going on... but I know I'm buying the next one! (KG)

Judge Dredd Megazine #4.14
Rebellion
By Various

Slaine and *Halo Jones* are the main focus points of this month's feature slots, while a new series of *Lenny Zero* debuts alongside the regular strips. The *Dredd* strip, despite good art from Anthony Williams, is little more than filler, which is surprising when you consider that it's written by the usually reliable Gordon Rennie. The art is truly the strip's saving grace, with a particularly fun double-page spread and good page layouts.

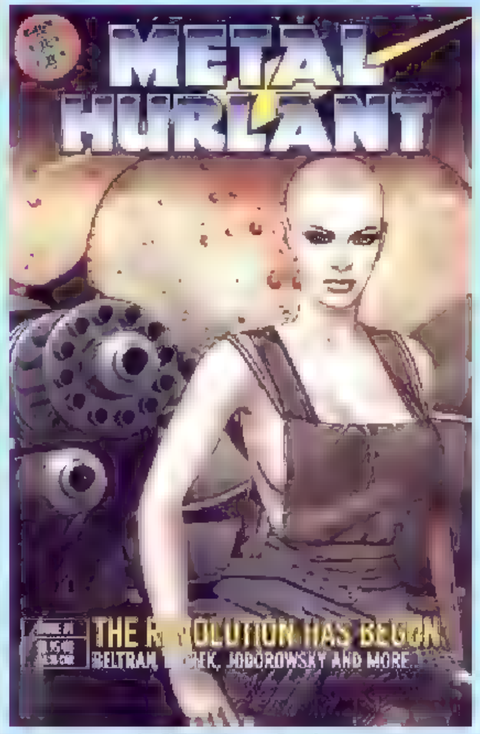
Lenny Zero makes a strong start, with excellent art from Jock that conveys the action and gritty underworld setting very well. Andy Diggle writes well, helping to turn a fairly clichéd Judge Dredd idea (renegade Judges) into a strong ongoing series.

The so far disappointing *Durham Red* series hits a high point as artist of the moment Frazer Irving superbly illustrates Dan Abnett's spooky tale of Samurai-era horror. Irving's unique art style works very well here, and the use of repeated panels and spot colouring is particularly effective, as his ability to draw action scenes. This is a fantastic little tale, and while it is no replacement for a proper Durham Red series, it is undeniably the best strip this month.

The Bendatti Vendetta continues, giving the reader some much needed background information to the secret agent fun in the previous issue. It is still uncertain what this series is doing in the Megazine, however, as it seems at this point to be a relic from Fleetway's old Crisis comic, especially with the unique painted art of John Burns. Nonetheless, the premise is a good one and it will be interesting to see how the series develops.

Bad Company reaches a high point as desperation strikes the squad, and some intriguing questions are raised. This bodes well for next month's conclusion, as long as the dreaded "2000AD Crap Ending Syndrome" is avoided. Everything blows up in *Hellboy*, and John Byrne's script threatens to drag things down with superfluous captioning, but the ever-wonderful art of Mike Mignola, as well as the sheer greatness of the concept, makes it immune to Byrne's worst scripting, and a superb cliffhanger brings the tale to an effective end.

Rounding off the package is a reprinted *Time Twisters* by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons. As Gibbons admits in one of this issue's features, there is a great deal of their later Watchmen in this strip, as they experiment with techniques, including making use of the backgrounds to convey important details. The strip shows what a brilliant artist Gibbons is, with a beautifully clean black



Metal Hurlant #1
Humanoids Publishing
By Various

The packaging and presentation of this doesn't half remind me of Marvel in its early days. Not in a physical sense, since Marvel never used magazine cover stock for its covers, let alone for all the interior pages, but in the way it sells itself as something different, something unusual... something *superior*. There's a great deal of self-mythologizing going on at Humanoids; the first story here, for example, is a brief, dark and somewhat cramped SF tale of planetary rape and destruction culminating in the creation of a cosmic entity which, we are told, is the real Metal Hurlant after which the magazine is named. It's very neat, very clever, and Jodorowsky's scripting shapes scintillas of light and sound into a coherent narrative, as usual. But it's still the Merry Marvel Marching Society, effendi - more urbane, cool and stylish, but still insisting "buy our comics, we're different from the rest", just as Stan Lee used to.

So is this really any different, or is it just a hip, upmarket version of Strange Tales with, as the hype promises, a life of its own? Pierre Wazem's *Day Off* suggests an openness to variation which is promising; its six pages of ratty black and white pencils wordlessly follow a man as he walks around a city and just looks and watches, nothing more. But it sits amid a sea of portentous, heavyweight graphic realism which seems to lock the all-pervading spirit of Moebius in a prison of precise 3D rendering and computer trickery; it may not be much like anything else you'll find in an American comicbook, but any new direction it offers is distinctly dystopian if this first issue is anything to go by. Maybe I haven't taken enough drugs lately to get into the distorted cosmology of it all - or maybe it *is* just another SF anthology book with added bells and whistles. Time, I suppose, will tell.
The Verdict: It may be rather different from standard US comic shop fare, but that doesn't mean it's outstanding, or unique. (MK)

Click on Globe returns to contents

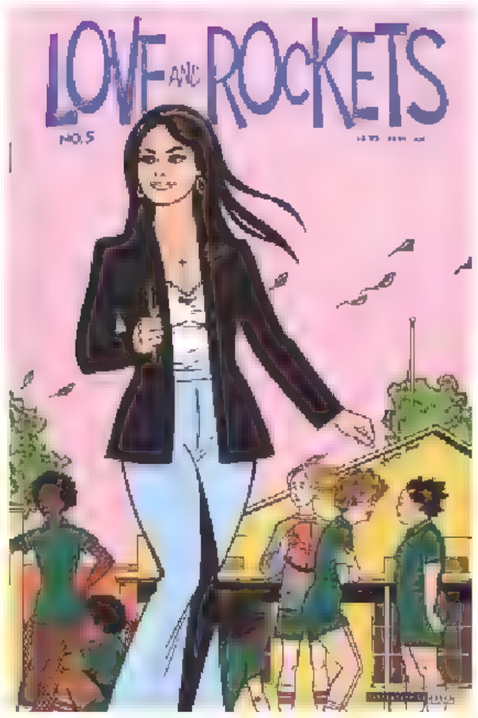
and white style. Alan Moore's writing shows that clever need not mean dull, with an entertaining plot, good dialogue and some humorous moments. More of this kind of reprint would be a very welcome addition to the Megazine.
The Verdict: An excellent issue with a number of good strips, this is superb value. (KG)

The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen Vol. 2 #1
ABC/Wildstorm
By Alan Moore & Kevin O'Neill
Already, within the space of ten pages, this is a more ambitious and far-reaching project than the previous series, and that's before one reaches the astonishing New Traveller's Almanac provided at the end of the story, an impressive concordance that unites centuries of weird and fantastic fiction into one unifying whole and establishes the existence of other Leagues throughout the ages.

We are introduced to [Edwin L. Arnold's] Gullivar Jones as he meets with [Burroughs'] John Carter and they assist the Martian tribes in ridding the planet of alien invaders who then proceed to evacuate Mars and attack Earth using very familiar space cylinders and tripods. Yet it's the wealth of detail throughout the story that makes it such an enjoyable experience. The way Moore reconciles Edgar Rice Burroughs' Martians with those of H. G. Wells is masterful and understated, adding to the tapestry rather than compromising it. The pages of Martian dialogue ably lettered by Todd Klein add mystery and exoticism to the scenes. It's an old world made new by a master storyteller, one who never underestimates or short-changes his audience.

Kevin O'Neill doesn't skimp on the detail either, his every page a wealth of intricacy and eye-catching ornamentation. Few artists can match the weird ferocity on display here, let alone the subtleties of change and environment that O'Neill handles with consummate ease.
The Verdict: If a fraction of modern comics could manage a fraction of this quality we'd sell millions. (AC)

Love and Rockets #5
Fantagraphics
By Beto, Jaime and Mario Hernandez
An "origin" story for Penny Century after all these years - who'd have expected it? Not that it makes any difference to anything. Penny has always been the most nebulous of Jaime Hernandez's cast of main characters, an airhead floating in and out of story after story without ever impacting much on any of them. Now we know that she was always that way, and we still



don't know exactly why she fascinated her billionaire lover H.R. Costigan. It's all a tease, if a very attractive-looking one.

As ever, Beto provides the real variety in the comic. This issue he's in a playful, somewhat sombre mode, contributing a lot of tiny strips; the regular *Julio's Day* series gets just one page (it was raining that day); Fritzi is abused and discarded once again, learning that it isn't what you want to look like that counts, it's what others think you look like; Roy Cowboy dresses up as Roy Cowboy; human/animal hybrids roam a somewhat Kirbyesque future Earth; and we learn something about a late 19th century Mexican cartoonist. If none of that makes sense, then it probably isn't supposed to – think of it as a kaleidoscope, and the view's just fine.

Mario's serial is still hard going after five issues. It isn't that it's weak in any way, or difficult; on the contrary it comes across as a lucid, well-constructed parable about surviving in various jungles, natural and corporate. But somehow it doesn't fit in with the rest of the book; it's too serious, too weighty and yet too superficial. It's too much like any other comics – that's the problem.
The Verdict: Another sample of deliriously frothy entertainment from Los Bros. The incongruity of Mario's story notwithstanding, this is still one of the most captivating comics coming out of the USA. (MK)

Marvel Mangaverse #5
Marvel
By Ben Dunn and Kevin Gunstone
Bravestarr. They've turned Black Panther into Bravestarr. Luckily, it works better here than it did in the futuristic cowboy's own TV series.

This is an interesting issue, as the surviving heroes unite to fight the Mangaverse version of Doctor Doom, who killed the Avengers and beheaded Captain America last time. There is no sign in the writing of this title's impending cancellation, and I hope that this will not lead to a rushed conclusion next issue. Again, the creative team give Doom a strong and sympathetic moral position, distancing the Latverian dictator from the usual comic supervillainy, but also raising more questions about how this plot will be satisfactorily resolved. In this case, however, it is more anticipation than worry.

Ben Dunn again produces some beautiful art. One impressive aspect is the way he has used plenty of large panels and splash pages, and yet this comic still feels like a relatively dense read. Part of the art's loveliness is due to the sumptuous colouring of Guru eFX, which manages to be both subtle and vibrant at the same time.

So, an issue that effectively sets up what should be a very interesting conclusion, but with plenty of strengths of its own. One of them is the way scripter and co-plotter Kevin Gunstone inserts plenty of subtle touches that add greatly to the characters and their world. As well as the ever-interesting possibility that Doom may be in the right, we are presented with a racist Nick Fury and a wonderfully laconic version of Doctor Strange. On the other hand, Tigra remains a one-dimensional party girl with funny skin, but at least she provides a good foil for Strange.

It will certainly be sad to see this title go.
The Verdict: It's too late to save Mangaverse, but it's not too late to enjoy it; and enjoy it you will, because it's great! (KG)

Oni Press Color Special 2002
Oni
By Various
It would be rather naïve to assume that this annual anthology is not a glorified advert for upcoming or currently available Oni products, but never before has it been so obvious. Whereas in previous years, the short strips have been entertaining and have contained the somewhat important elements of a beginning, a middle and an end, most of this

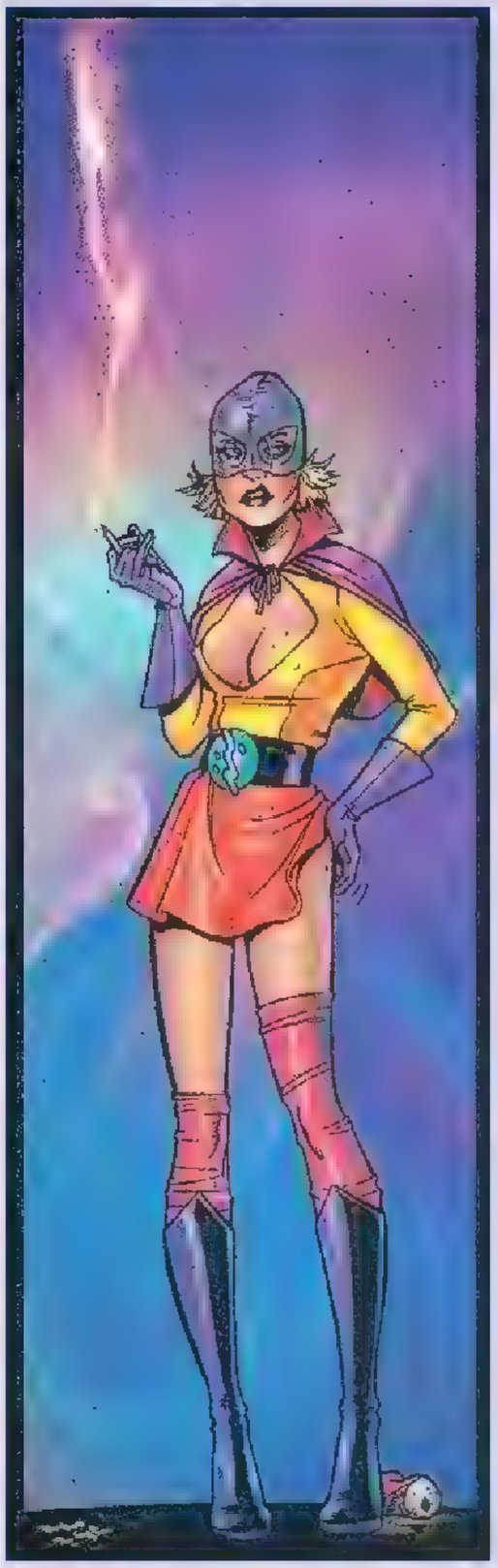
year's are like movie trailers, a combination of "clips" from the main features, struggling to avoid incoherency.

Most absurd is Gary Phillips' introduction to the Shot Callerz series, which really makes the most of the colour format by being a text piece. How text justifies the full colour treatment, I cannot fathom. The story is in fact quite well written, in a Sin City mould, but has no place here.

Warren Ellis, Phil Hester and Ande Parks produce an interesting concept in *The Operation*, which tries to emulate the success of last years' Powers spoof and fails. A bit like Planetary or *The X Files* played for laughs, it suffers from a lack of substance, despite some very good ideas.

Everything else fails to be interesting or readable, apart from a couple of cartoony and, it must be said, nonsensical strips. *Courtney Crumrin And The Night Things* is a complete story, although "complete" and "story" are barely applicable to this slight tale. A strange but very attractive art style and a wonderfully written script make this strip a delight, though.

Buddha Master And Angst Man has an even weaker plot than *Courtney Crumrin*, and has no respect for storytelling conventions such as coherence of narrative, yet it manages to be the other main highlight of the anthology. As with Hewlett and Martin's Tank Girl a lack of structure is made into a strength, producing a highly entertaining jaunt into the surreal. Some of the jokes are too obviously vulgar, but somehow it works and works very well indeed, due in part to newcomer Aaron Horvath's stunning cartoon art. If the proposed full series is anything



The Pro

Image

By Garth Ennis and Amanda Conner

You've read all the hype. Now it's time to see if it was worth all the fuss. Guess what? It works.

It's also funny. Not the funniest thing you'll read ever, but it beats the crap out of Savage Dragon. Or the JLA, and that's what it's taking a poke at. It takes a superheroine who was slurping man-fat just prior to being given her powers to be able to really observe the absolute stupidity of superheroes.

Yeah, so it's a manufactured storyline to give Garth Ennis the chance to be cruel to the superhero genre; it still makes for incredibly easy reading and this isn't really like his trademark stuff. It's got sex, violence and swearing, yet it's actually a morality tale wrapped up in ill-fitting spandex, camp do-gooders and more blowjobs than you can shake the proverbial stick at (or in this case... nah, let's not go there).

The thing that lets it down is the heroic ending. There is a twist in the tale, but I get the feeling that one character's outburst on the final page was out of respect for the book's titular character rather than because this is the way he intends to deal with villains in the future. And ultimately, because of the typical superhero denouement it loses a lot of the impact it should have had as a serious satire on the completely anally retentive and frankly quite stupid way that superteams exist in their respective universes and treat each other so seriously.

However, it does question the genre because, despite portraying The League of Honor as a bunch of anachronisms, it isn't too far from what Morrison and Waid did on the revival of the JLA, except this time there's a tongue planted firmly in the cheek of the writer. In the end we get a female superhero that is DC's JLA all rolled into one, in a team who are like a cross between the old Justice League International and some frightfully polite role-players. So when she starts disembowelling perps and giving the Superman clone the best (and only) BJ he's ever likely to have, the rest of the team don't want her playing on their turf anymore. And then comes her chance to redeem herself in the eyes of her colleagues at the very end.

And this is where the moral of the story is lost. Pro doesn't have to redeem herself, she's the only redeeming quality of the entire comic - her colleagues, the villains and the people associated with her are all as lifeless as a dildo without its batteries and when she has to do the decent thing at the end you're left with the feeling that this was a one-off joke and the creators had to take her foul mouth, her ill-fitting costume and her belly full of sperm and leave it as far away as they could from the rest of the comics world. Which is a shame, because this is head and shoulders better than the awful Dicks that Ennis is involved with.

It's nice to see Amanda Conner handling something as controversial as this and emerging at the other end as a star. It isn't the best art job she's ever done, but some of the vignettes and standalone pieces are truly wonderful. Am I the only person to look at the cover and think "sleazy Dave Stevens"?

The Verdict: I can see this taking on a cult status, maybe even becoming something of a watershed in parody comics. It is actually worth the admission price. There is more to it than meets the eye and if you can forgive the cop-out then you'll dig it, baby! (DRB)

like this short, it will be a winner.

But the rest of the strips? Oh dear...

The Verdict: A waste of money, unfortunately. You'd be better off getting the better strips as solo titles than buying this. (KG)

Soldier X #2
Marvel
By Darko Macan and Igor Kordey

I'd never have expected to like a comic starring Nathan Summers. He's nearly always been "that stupid time travelling X-character", but now he's something different. Macan and Kordey have managed to create an enjoyable Cable, and the only X-book to sit nicely alongside Morrison's New X-Men. This is an intelligent comic, and one that has firmly grounded its hero in the real world, giving him an almost James Bond-like quality. It shares Bond's quips, and the occasional comedic moments, and above all the adventure.

The Verdict: A new, much improved, and very interesting Cable. (KH)

Spider-Man/Daredevil
Marvel Knights
By Brett Mathews and Vatche Mavlian

What an absolutely gorgeous looking comic. It's been a long time since I've pored over the pages of something as much as this. Shades of Gene Colan and Art Suydam, Sam Kieth and Berni Wrightson, even shades of Frank Miller and Todd McFarlane in the pencils, although this art may have been shot from the pencils and coloured directly without any inking, so fine and soft is the detail. Mavlian's storytelling is excellent, his facial expressions are marvellous, and his composition is perfect. He is a find.

Writer Brett Mathews (apparently something to do with *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*) provides a snappy, humorous script that ultimately goes nowhere, but certainly enjoys itself getting there. Essentially, it's just a night in the lives of Matt and Pete, and it's little the worse for all that.

The Verdict: Exquisitely illustrated and enjoyably scripted, this stands out from the current glut of Spider-Man spin-off product through the bizarrely old-fashioned concept of simple quality. (AC)

Thundercats #1
Wild Storm
By Ford Lytle Gilmore and Ed McGuinness

Thundercats was a funny one. It had arguably the best theme tune of all the '80s cartoons, and was better made than either *Transformers* or *GI Joe*, but suffered from being somewhat dull and also being, frankly, a faintly embarrassing concept.

Much the same can be said of

this latest jumper onto the retro comics bandwagon. It looks wonderful, with great art from Ed McGuinness and Jason Martin. McGuinness rightly puts a very cartoony twist into his work, which immediately sets the correct tone for this somewhat camp series. Chris Walker provides good colouring, sticking to a limited palette of basic colours, which again enforces the cartoony feel.

However, the writing is less accomplished. The scripting is adequate but the characters have yet to find distinctive voices, with the exception of Panthro, whose stoic and pragmatic leadership is spot on. The main weakness is the plotting, which is quite weak and in places rather inconsistent (villains bring in shadow-bloke because Mumm-Ra is a failure; shadow-bloke fails so villains resurrect Mumm-Ra). This is just as unsophisticated a narrative as an episode of the TV series.

That said, this isn't a bad comic. It barely rises above OK, but it isn't a travesty by any means. There are far worse comics available, and Thundercats is certainly, along with Transformers: Armada, the best of the retro comics to date. A little tinkering with the writing, and some better story ideas, and this could be quite good. It's not good enough to win over a non-*Thundercats* fan like me, but it's bound to be a big hit with the fans.

The Verdict: It's good-looking and adequately written, which makes it one of the better retro comics currently available, but it might be for *Thundercats* fans only. (KG)

Ultimates #6
Marvel
By Mark Millar and Bryan Hitch

The concluding chapter of the origin of the Ultimate Universe's answer to the Avengers follows the team members' personal lives, as the after effects of the Hulk's rampage take a few surprising turns. Millar has a keen sense of character and dialogue, making for very entertaining reading, and his reinterpretation of a classic concept works as well as Bendis' Spider-Man; but perhaps he goes one step too far.

One character is revealed to have a terminal condition, while another suffers hidden side-effects from their powers - and these are interesting and intriguing enough points, but the reintroduction of Hank Pym's abusive treatment of the Wasp is perhaps one step into a darker area for merely sensationalist gain.

Hitch's layouts are as stunning as ever but his finishing here is a little bland, perhaps rushed to meet deadlines.

The Verdict: Another example of great characterisation and quality art winning out over mindless spandex action. (NL)

Ultimate Spider-Man #25
Marvel
By Brian Michael Bendis and Mark Bagley

All you need to know about this issue is that the Green Goblin has kidnapped MJ and is holding her atop a bridge. And that's on the cover.

Which leaves us with 21 interior pages, about which a great deal may be said. For example, trite. Obvious. Pointless. Padded. Clichéd. Redundant. Vacuous. Needless. Tired. Unadventurous. Plodding. Unworthy.

You know, if you're going to do this, do it right. Bring something to it. When Bendis cleverly reversed the roles of MJ and Gwen Stacy in this title, it was a breath of fresh air, and those cynics who joked that pretty soon the Green Goblin would drop MJ from the Brooklyn Bridge were silenced by the brilliant issue 13, which did what this series is supposed to do – retell stories that we think we know, in ways we can't imagine.

We can imagine this issue. Anyone who has read the Death of Gwen Stacy has already read it. And there's nothing here to make this any different from that storyline, or any better.

I always preferred Gwen anyway...

The Verdict: A tired retread of original Spidey history, without any of the spark this title usually has. Unless MJ isn't actually dead after all, in which case the next issue should be a blast. (AC)

Uncanny X-Men #410
Marvel
Chuck Austen and Ron Garney

I've read this before. Literally "before" any of you and "before" in a previous X-life...

I used to be an X-Men fanatic. I also used to be addicted to nicotine. I look back at both and I wonder, why?

Click on Globe returns to contents

I've read this before: every single X-Men writer attempts this kind of story. It's a form of projection - the writer is new and he is the alien amongst an established order, so he writes a story about alienation within an alienated cohort. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. I'll pass judgement on this attempt at the end.

A newcomer always wants to impress and X-Men fans are a tough bunch to please. But, the writer also needs to be able to impress enough so that people who are not familiar with the X-Men will be able to appreciate the story. Therefore, ably aided by Ron Garney, new boy Chuck (Porno) Austen manages to say enough, in a concise manner, to make me, a long-lapsed X-fan, understand it. No mean feat in comics nowadays. I didn't really appreciate it because, like I said, I've read this story before. But this time the delivery of the story was as important as the execution of the key moments.

I have to say that on analytical grounds I'd have a problem believing "Fish Boy" could have existed before Charles Xavier and Hank McCoy's arrival in his small town. I have difficulty believing that any person that resembled a sea bass would have been allowed to grow the way this one had without at some point having to face his worst nightmare - the local fishmonger. But this is the Marvel Universe and we have to suspend... oh, you know.

On the flip side of Chuck and Hank's daytrip to Seaworld is Angel and the team's journey to Scotland to sort out some nominally important X-stuff. Cut back to Lamprey Lad getting the caviar kicked out of him, cut back to the X-Men, half the team dead and the other half wishing they were. Then it's back to the Blackbird with Xavier, Beast and Barracuda Boy all strapped in, just about to be redirected from their journey to the boy's new school to aid the X-Men as they face blah, blah, blah...

It isn't bad. In fact it's better than I expected and I think that has a lot to do with Garney's artwork, but also with the way Austen swings the story around. It's fairly obvious that either Cod Kid is going to save the day or end up as fish food; I'm guessing that Austen wants to kick off with a bang, and killing off some helpless mutant bloater is as good a way of stirring up the pond as any other.

I don't think non-X-fans would jump at this, but then again is that who they're really aiming this at? The Verdict: An old formulaic story done with surprising panache. An all round accomplished piece of work that Austen, above all else, will probably be very proud of. (PH)

Viz #118
IFG/Fulchester Industries
By Various

Viz might not be as pancreas-destroyingly hilarious as it was at its peak six or seven years ago, but it still contains enough refreshingly juvenile double-entendres, sick jokes, slapstick and swearing to make even the

Weapon X: The Draft

Marvel

By Various

Released as a five issue miniseries (all available in August), Weapon X: The Draft acts as a precursor to Marvel's new ongoing Weapon X series, which should see the light of day in September. Each issue finds the mysterious (and frankly unpleasant) Director sending one member of his Weapon X Program on a mission to recruit new allies, and can be read as a self-contained story or as part of the series. It's all very reader-friendly stuff from smiley new Marvel...

I can't tell you what all five are like, unfortunately, because I've only got three. You're going to have to buy the other two yourself. None of them are numbered, so we're just going to have to muddle through.

Sauron: This is by far best of the three issues reviewed here. The now witless Sauron, robbed of his intelligence and hypnotic powers by the tinkering of the Weapon X Programme, must attempt to recruit the ever-lovely Emma Frost, the White Queen. The Director doesn't like Sauron.

Perhaps predictably, Sauron gets his arse handed to him in a sling by Ms Frost (who appears now to be 15 years younger than when she was terrorising the X-Men as a member of the Hellfire Club), and is forced to move on to Plan B. Plan B takes him to Australia to recruit a telepathic leper. I'm not making this up.

But it's all good fun. Writer Buddy Scalera handles the new Sauron deftly, and the reader is left feeling genuinely sorry for the poor, mistreated hapless lizard fella. The Director is clearly a very unpleasant man indeed. Karl Kerschl's fresh style helps to keep the whole thing light-hearted, although why he's chosen to portray the White Queen as a Californian High School cheerleader is a mystery.

Wild Child: Poor, misunderstood Wild Child. Sabretooth's ugly little brother just can't get a break...

In this issue, the stinky old Director, who I'm really starting not to like, sends scrappy little Wild Child off to recruit Jeanne-Marie Baubier, Alpha Flight's Aurora. It's not a happy tale, this one, and, as with Sauron, one is left feeling awfully sorry for the lead character.

Writer Matt Nixon displays an excellent understanding of his characters, drawing comparisons between Wild Child and Aurora as emotionally needy types whose hard, uncompromising exteriors hide a mass of insecurities. It was these qualities that made them two of Alpha Flight's most intriguing and sophisticated characters and it is very much to Nixon's credit that he recognises and continues this.

Ethan van Sciver's pencils are competent without being overly impressive. His Wild Child is suitably ugly, resembling one of the silent heart-stealing characters from that really eerie silent *Buffy* episode, but there's nothing to get too excited about here.

Zero: Well, he was always going to turn up wasn't he? Come on, have a guess. Agent Zero isn't being sent to recruit anyone. No, no, he's on an assassin's mission. His quarry? Everyone's favourite Canadian claw-wielding maniac mutant...

In all, this is the weakest of the three books. Frank Tieri's story is fine, posing more questions than it answers and serving as a tasty appetiser for the ongoing series. But Killian Plunkett's shabby pencils and Terry Austin's scratchy inks do it no justice – whatever happened to Austin? At some point in the mid-'80s it seems he stopped tracing with a pen and started using the tip of a bread knife. This guy was on the X-Men for goodness' sake. When it was great!

The Verdict: These one-shots have whetted my appetite for the forthcoming Weapon X series. There's just something about those crazy Canadians... (NM)

most grumpy-arsed Radiohead fan cry tears of pure mirth.

Highlights this issue include the return of comedy xenophobe Billy Britain ("The party's over Johnny Dago! You're catching the next boat home!"), a pleasingly violent episode of *It's The Bacons* ("Snog 'im on the mooth, y'big heemasex!") and the gloriously filthy *Wee Jack Ulate* ("Quick Jack! Think hard aboot fannies!"). Viz is always best, though, when it inserts real people and celebrities into its stories - hence the brilliant *Six Wives Of Henry The Eighth*, in which Ann Boleyn, Catharine Parr and co. are portrayed as boozy laddettes out on a hen night ("He was naught but a knave and a twat!"). Additionally, there are strips featuring spot on comic assaults on Ben Elton, P. Diddy and David Blaine, proving that Viz is still great at the knob gags, but even better when it comes to satirising the rich, famous and stupid.

The Verdict: Still the funniest English language humour comic in existence. Just buy it, you miserable fuckers. (AW)

X-Men Unlimited #37
Marvel
By Kaare Andrews + various

What a pleasant surprise. Behind a nicely stark cover - one half white, one half filled with every imaginable version of Wolverine fighting every other - lies a well told tale that, although filled with every cliché imaginable, still manages to work.

Andrews' script concerns a break in reality that merges universes into one, bringing all incarnations of the X-Men together in a big brawl. It's a big fight scene, punctuated by some gentle interludes of thoughtfulness and genuine affection. The principal aid here is the differing styles of artwork, with Josh Middleton's beautifully rendered Professor X and Kitty Pryde up against Andrews' kinetic cartoon X-Men, and Mike Kunkel's fantasy landscapes clashing with Troy Nixey's hellish vistas and villains. There is even a page wherein Dave McCaig shows us the X-Babies and Chris Giarrusso's Bullpen Bits caricatures. It shouldn't work, yet it does, perhaps due to the fact that the artists haven't compromised their styles. Each page is recognisable, although Dave Stewart has loosely inked Nixey so that his linework resembles Charles Vess's - but a close look will reveal Nixey underneath.

This is a story we must all have read many times before, here made more remarkable by the artistic talents involved, their differing styles aiding the story. Is it a sign that Andrews' versatility as an artist may be about to divert into the writing arena?

The Verdict: Classic X-Men nonsense, from an increasingly capable writer and a diverse range of art talent, all working together to add meaning and pathos to the tale. (AC)

X-Statix #1
Marvel Comics
By Peter Milligan, Michael Allred and Darwyn Cooke

A relaunch for X-Force, primarily because the super group themselves have decided to change their name, and nothing to do with Rob Liefeld or the business desirability of a new number one. Of course not. It also gives the whining basement dwellers who've done nothing but cry since this title became readable a chance to jump off and devote their time to more porn-surfing, relentless self-abuse and the sort of social inadequacy to which Jeffrey Dahmer would have aspired.

Nothing else has really changed. The characters are all hideous egotists, self-centred bores and wrong-headed self-promoters. Now that I think about it: why didn't those veteran X-Force fans *love* this comic? You'd think that people who couldn't be superheroes would enjoy seeing superheroes become like them.

The back up strip is an interesting epilogue to the main story, which concerns Corkscrew, a character trying out for the group who is diagnosed as mentally unstable and dangerous – a Code X. In the Darwyn Cooke illustrated coda, Doop takes Corkscrew into the woods. He doesn't bring him out again. Cooke's persistent *Blair Witch* POV panels evoke a spooky atmosphere that makes Doop's character even more mysterious – and now dangerous - than it was before.

The Verdict: A perfect issue for newcomers, as good as ever for regular readers and hopefully not being bought by those wankers who can now go and buy whatever shite Liefeld is peddling this month. (AC)

VERDICT COLLECTED EDITION

Blackmark
30th Anniversary Edition
Fantagraphics Books
By Gil Kane and Archie Goodwin

Swords! Sorcery! Heroic stuff! Looking up people's nostrils! It must be Gil Kane's Blackmark. This is an interesting story.

Gil Kane was a giant in the late 1960s. His dynamic pencilling on DC's The Atom and Green Lantern had made him a firm fan favourite (with good reason; if you've never checked out Silver Age Green Lantern, go and enjoy yourself, it's breathtaking stuff). But Kane wanted a bit more than that.

Kane was keen to explore comicbook storytelling as an art form. Unusually for his time, Kane believed that the words in a comicbook were as important as the artwork (I know what you're thinking. This guy must have been crazy! What was he thinking?). And he wanted to own his creative work, which Marvel and DC wouldn't hear of. So he decided to do his own thing.

Blackmark, along with Kane's pulp series His Name Is...Savage, was the culmination of this creative vision. It was groundbreaking and unique and Fantagraphics' 30th anniversary reprint is a wholly welcome retrospective.

Blackmark doesn't look like a comic book, and was never supposed to. Each page contains maybe two or three illustrations

and a few paragraphs of Archie Goodwin's (rather purple) prose. It's more than just an illustrated story, as the panels are sequential, but it is far denser and more wordy than anything Kane had produced before. It was originally published as a paperback book and this reprint stays pretty faithful to that vision, smaller as it is than a standard comicbook.

Needless to say, the artwork is an absolute feast. Given the freedom to construct each illustration as he wanted, away from the confines of a regular sequential page, Kane goes to town. His creation of an otherworldly, post-apocalyptic Earth is wonderfully realised and each panel exudes energy and life. This is an absolute master of his craft enjoying himself. Go along for the ride.

The story is far from original, telling as it does the rise of the eponymous hero from slave and gladiator to become the leader

of a revolt against a corrupt and cruel ruler. Take one Spartacus, dice and fry in a little oil. Add three tablespoons of Robert E. Howard and a pinch of the Bible. Stir well and serve hot or cold. It is no surprise that, when Blackmark was finally reprinted by a major US company, it appeared in Marvel's Savage Sword Of Conan.

Kane drafted in his friend Archie Goodwin to script the book and Goodwin seemed to catch the freedom bug. This is a wordy piece, but somehow rarely strays into hyperbole. It is, however, a script that takes itself very seriously, and is clearly the product of a bygone, pre-post-modern era.

Perhaps Kane's greatest achievement here is keeping the reader's interest. There's little genuine originality, but he takes a fairly simple story, paces it well and illustrates it beautifully. There are twists and turns here and there, but nothing too testing. It remains a simple story, lovingly told.

One gets from this book a real sense that Kane and Goodwin were really enjoying themselves, flexing their creative muscles. From the first lavish page to the last, there is a palpable sense that the pair had a real love for their creation, and they were going to use all of their considerable talents to ensure it was properly realised.

The Fantagraphics package is lovely too. If Blackmark was a labour of love for Kane, the publisher has done his memory proud. Their choice of format, smaller than a comic, but larger than a paperback, is a wise one, presenting Kane's pages as they were intended. Gary Groth's afterword displays a knowledge of and love for the work and its creator that is both infectious and endearing.

The Verdict: A piece of comic book history. The product of one of comics greatest talents at his peak. A visually stunning piece of work. Stop reading this rubbish review and go and get a copy. (NM)

GOOD COP BAD COP

Crisis on Multiple Earths

DC/Titan Books

By Gardner Fox, Mike Sekowsky, Bernard Sachs and Sid Greene

One day, Mr DC created loads of worlds. Time passed, and Mr DC was happy with his worlds. Then, Mr DC realised that nothing made sense any more, because he had too many of 'em. So he got rid of most of them. Crisis On Infinite Earths. Brilliant.

Now Crisis on Multiple Earths reprints the first eight Silver Age crossovers featuring the JLA and their Earth-Two predecessors, the JSA, and provides newer readers (like myself) with a picture of how DC came to its Crisis Crossroads. Unfortunately, it's a book that has a place as an historical curio and not much else.

This is not the best of the Silver Age. Both the art and the script have a certain naivety, which is initially appealing but after eight issues it becomes grating. When you consider what Stan, Jack and Steve were up to across town it serves only to highlight how far DC was behind Marvel creatively. It's kind of like borrowing a Gerry and the Pacemakers album when you know you've got *Revolver* and *Rubber Soul* on your shelf.

The Verdict: Sorry to be unromantic, but steer clear of this one. (Neil McOnie is the Bad Cop)

With a new JLA/JSA crossover imminent, here's a collection of their earliest get-togethers from the 1960s. Although today's readers may find the characterisation quaint or the scripts hokey, it's still fascinating to see where so many of the concepts and plot ideas we take for granted had their genesis.

The first JLA/JSA crossover is a pretty standard "trade enemies and win" plot, perhaps necessarily so when you consider the expanse of exposition needed to explain the duplicate earths concept to readers. Once that was established, Gardner Fox allowed his imagination to run wild over the next few years. Earth-3 was next, and the first Crime Syndicate of America story – a plot and characters that Morrison and Quitely remained surprisingly faithful to in their JLA: Earth 2 graphic novel.

More imaginative - and enjoyable - still is *Earth Without A Justice League*, in which an evil Johnny Thunder's T-bolt goes back in time to tamper with the origins of the JLA, first removing them from existence entirely, then replacing them with a pack of mobsters and thugs.

Finally in this collection, *Crisis Between Earth-One And Earth-Two* shows where Marv Wolfman found much of his inspiration in the '80s, with a giant Anti-Matter Man wreaking havoc as he brings the two earths together, and a familiar "Spectre-acular" space showdown. Meanwhile, for anybody who thinks a choking obsession with continuity is a modern malady... prepare to be surprised by the sea of footnotes in these reprints.

The Verdict: Inspired plotting that influenced generations of comicbook writers. (Rol Hirst is this month's Good Cop)

Cardcaptor Sakura: Master of the Clow Vol. 1

Tokyopop

By Clamp

Continuing the kids' series on which the cartoon is based, Cardcaptor Sakura has made the jump to Tokyopop's *100% Authentic* line-up. The move has done the book good, with an increase in size making the artwork shine even more, and Tokyopop making a good decision to move to a more comicbook-like font, rather than the basic fonts (Times New Roman etc.) found in the previous books. The presentation is also far better, with the cover looking like the Book Of The Clow.

The story? Well, it's the usual, and top-notch, school kid magician romp, with plenty of action, intrigue, comedy and love. All in all, it's Cardcaptor Sakura, and it's good.

The Verdict: More excellent work from Clamp. (KH)

Click on Globe returns to contents

Catwoman: Selina's Big Score
DC
By Darwyn Cooke

An unusual choice for a hardcover release, this offering from DC is a prequel to the successfully re-launched current Catwoman series and tells the tale of how Selina Kyle returned to Gotham - and why she has had a change in objective and lifestyle.

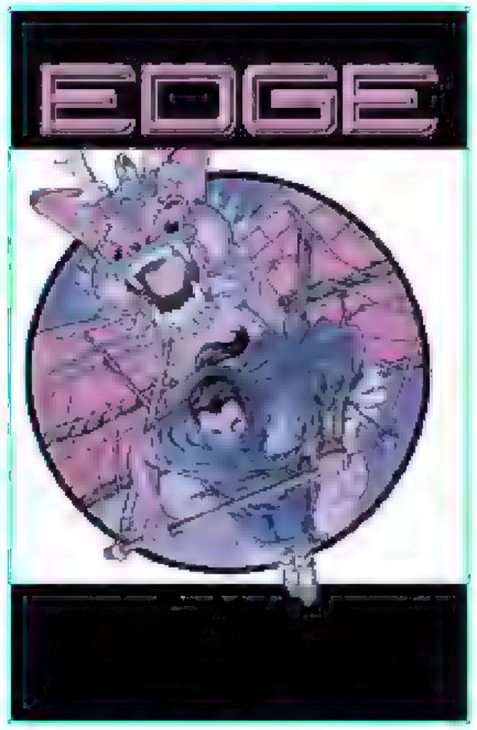
Teamed with a former lover and a loose gang of acquaintances, the former Catwoman finds herself broke - so she embarks on a multi-million dollar heist that is doomed to end in tragedy. It is this that transforms the character of Selina Kyle into someone a lot less mercenary than in her thieving days. Kyle is always an intriguing character and here writer/artist Darwyn Cooke gives her an involving, hardboiled crime story to run around in (no spandex at all except in about four flashback panels). Although Cooke's art style - kind of like Alex Toth inking Jack Kirby - will not be to everybody's tastes, it draws the reader in and perfectly complements the writing.

The Verdict: Entertaining and solid, but wait for the softcover. (NL)

Edge #4
CrossGen
By Various

There's a whole bunch of stuff here reprinted from Forge #4, so check out last month's Borderline for my views on *Saurians: Unnatural Selection* and *Way Of The Rat*. Suffice it to say here that apart from the quality of the strips themselves, this unnecessary repetition on CrossGen's part is getting annoying.

The cover features a gun-toting "babe" clad in PVC, which neatly sets the tone for this



month's dose of *Sigil*. New writer Chuck Dixon brings some interesting plot developments with him, as well as an aptitude for scrappy, but fast-moving plotting. However, he also seems to have brought an acre of PVC, as the series' artists depict every female character in some costume made out of it, as well as having them striking ludicrous breast-exposing poses. This gets quite silly after a while, and since I don't remember it happening before, I assume Mr. Dixon is to blame. Luckily, his strong writing prevents my outrage blossoming into something serious like a refusal to buy this any more. Ahem.

The First has always had lots of scantily clad ladies, but since this is basic-Image-style-superheroes-in-disguise, that's to be expected. Also, since it's by far one of CrossGen's worst strips, I'm not nearly as disappointed with it as I am with *Sigil*. As usual, *The First* throws away the interesting "politics among gods" concept in favour of thinly veiled superheroics, and as usual it annoys greatly, because *The First* is important in terms of continuity. As a result, we get the usual dull plot and dull art, with some frustratingly important continuity revelations thrown in.

Then we get to *Ruse*, which is wonderful as usual. Truly intelligent writing and beautiful art make this one of the best comics around, and certainly a highlight of this anthology. It is a delight to read this strip and attempt to solve the mysteries before its characters do, and also a delight to reread it to find the clues you missed. Wonderful.

Mystic underachieves, as per usual. The art is sparse and empty looking and the plot is inconsequential. A couple of good jokes, and an interesting ending are the only highpoints.

Finally, *Scion* continues to impress in a subtle way. The art is quirky to the extent that I'm not sure I like it, the script is overblown, and the whole strip is packed with sword-and-sorcery clichés. That said, it has a very engaging plot, which somehow makes all of that irrelevant and keeps the reader entertained.

Edge is not as good as Forge, and hovers on the line between being worth buying and not. It has a couple of good strips, one excellent one, and one quite bad one that is essential if you're following CrossGen continuity. This makes it very hard to recommend, as even *I'm* not sure I should keep buying it.

The Verdict: If ever there was a book that defied review and relied on personal taste, this is it. Ask your comics retailer if you can look at it, and if you like it, buy it. Just don't ask me, I can't help you! (KG)

Forge #5
CrossGen
By Various

What is it with CrossGen this month? Is the CrossGen studio actually a men's prison compound? I only ask because of the level of gratuitous totty in this month's offerings from the company, which can only be the result of starved libidos. Over in Edge, we've got the fetishistic crowd, all PVC and guns, while Forge gives us *Sojourn*, with its classy soft focus quasi-porn. The art team is highly talented and the art is, for the most part, very good, but the frequency with which the heroine Arwyn is made to look like a model in a swimsuit catalogue is frankly laughable. One almost wants someone like Darwyn Cooke to pop in for a bit of guest artistry, just to shake things up a bit. Not only is the art gratuitous, the photo-realistic style lends a static feel to the storytelling, making this seem more like an illustrated book than

a comic. The story itself is a fairly sedate tale of a dragon, but with interesting ramifications for the series and a top cliffhanger.

Only one chapter of *Negation* this month, and one that is disappointing since it is completely predictable after last month's offering. Since what happens was entirely predictable, we want to know what happens next; and since we only get one chapter this month, that simply doesn't happen. Frustrating.

The Path continues to excel, with gorgeous artwork and superb writing. There are some good visual effects, such as the last page and the multiple-camera angle explosion. The colouring style is subtle yet very attractive, and the pencilling and inking are exquisite. The writing conveys a real sense of menace as events unfold, and there really should be more than one chapter of this a month!

Meridian's characters are likeable and well written, and the strip itself is warm and charming, despite the events within. If ever a comic could be described as "nice" this is it. It's never a highlight of the anthology, but always a dependable, enjoyable part.

Crux avoids the "confused JLA" superheroics of previous chapters and spends more time on interesting revelations about the CrossGen universe, making it the best chapter of the series so far! It is still rather slow-moving plot-wise, but it is good to see some improvement in this largely dull series. As long as it doesn't get stuck in a continuity-revealing rut, that improvement should continue.

Not the best issue of Forge, as there aren't enough chapters of the good strips, and too many of

the dull ones, but this is still a fine purchase.
The Verdict: A good quality anthology that could have been an excellent anthology with some better choosing of featured strips. (KG)

Hellboy: Seed of Destruction; The Right Hand of Doom; The Chained Coffin & Others
Dark Horse/Titan Books
By Mike Mignola

What sets Hellboy apart from many other horror comics is Mike Mignola's cheerful pillaging of so many different aspects of both horror and comicbook fiction. His fascination with ancient folklore entangles Hellboy in mythologies from England and Ireland to Romania and Russia, while in the first book (Seed of Destruction) alone you'll also find killer frogs, occultist nazis, ghosts, a firestarter, a massive Lovecraftian "creature of purest evil" (and its alien watchers)... even a stray super-hero!

Another thing that sets Hellboy apart - making it almost unique in comics, in fact - is that it succeeds most of all in the short story format. While the longer adventures (*Box Full of Evil* from The Right Hand of Doom; *The Wolves of Saint August* from The Chained Coffin & Others) tend to follow traditional horror-plot patterns (and even conform to the superhero comic tradition of culminating in an enormous fight scene), it's in the shorter stories that Mignola really breaks the formulae. Examples include the delightful *Pancakes* – a two-pager focussing on a two-year-old Hellboy (in TRHoD); and *The Corpse*, a black comedy about a dead guy who just wants to find a nice comfy grave (in TCC&O). Mignola's art adapts constantly to the rich assortment of genres. Nobody else captures crumbling castles and shadowy graveyards quite this well, but he's equally at home illustrating chunky violence and cute comedy too.

With a movie imminent, it'll be interesting to see what Hollywood makes of the character. Although certain aspects will undoubtedly transfer well onto celluloid (the huge, gothic fight sequences are crying out for a big sfx budget), the arguably more interesting - and quirky - elements of the strip may well get lost in translation.
The Verdict: Such a variety of styles and thrills – how will Hollywood ever manage to capture the true magic of Hellboy? (RH)

Judge Dredd: Muzak Killer
Titan Books
By Garth Ennis, Dermot Power and John Burns

Titan continues its reprints of Garth Ennis' *Dredd* tales with this collection of three stories... and one of them is OK.

The title story is rather weak, and shows all the worst aspects of Ennis' writing on *Dredd*, such as the half-hearted attempts at humour. All the jokes are merely unfunny digs at obvious targets - for instance, the Mega City One incarnation of British TV show *The Word*. The show was a parody of itself anyway, few took it seriously, so seeing it lampooned here hardly raises a smile, even if Dermot Power paints a nice version of its asinine host. All of these parodies of early '90s pop/music culture are tacked on to a central concept that also suffers from a lack of imagination. Ennis' point is that manufactured pop is not as worthy as "proper" music (you know, with instruments and stuff). This is hardly a groundbreaking assertion, and Ennis seems to have nothing new or unique to say on the subject.

Worse still is the *Edward Scissorhands*-inspired back-up strip, which is based around the same type of unimaginative pastiche that spoils the main story. There is nothing beyond that, as it fails to find any depth at all, and merely fills some space. Effective art again from Power, but it doesn't change the inconsequential nature of the strip.

The best story in this collection, although it has little competition, is a story of a Mega City One vigilante's clash with Dredd. Part of its success is due to the wonderful art of the peerless John Burns, but Ennis' writing is on good form here too. It is an entertaining and interesting tale, with its only flaw being that it suffers heavily from "2000AD Crap Ending Syndrome." That malady particularly affects *Judge Dredd* strips, for some reason. Given that the stories in 2000AD and the Megazine are short, being around five pages long at most, a certain amount of rushing and condensing of the story is understandable. However, surely a good writer should see this as a challenge, and write strips that suit the short format, rather than switching from a steady, measured pace to an abrupt, and often incoherent, ending. Here, despite only just starting out, the vigilante decides he's had enough and challenges Dredd to a fight, for no reason at all, with predictable results.

It's infuriating to see stories like this collected as the best of *Dredd*/2000AD, when there are far better stories to be collected. *Block Mania*, anyone? Titan do a good job with the collections, but they need to exercise better quality control over what goes into them. Even if they will insist on collecting the work of currently "hot" creators...
The Verdict: Perhaps it's time that Titan looked to different Dredd writers for future collections, as this Ennis stuff is scraping the barrel. (KG)

New X-Men: Imperial
Marvel
By Grant Morrison, Frank Quitely, Igor Kordey and Ethan Van Sciver

"I hate to completely undermine the party atmosphere, but there are billions of microscopic killer robots in our bloodstreams and a troop of violent alien ubermenschen advancing across the lawn..."

Only in a Grant Morrison comicbook could you read a line like that. It tells you everything you need to know about his approach to super-heroes - hit 'em with everything you've got, and save a wink for

the camera. The second New X-Men collection is an epic that takes in evil twins, human/mutant genetic engineering, nanotechnology, alien invasion and a herd of cows. Beyond that Morrison finds time to develop most of the characters, from Jean's flirtations with the Phoenix entity to Hank coming to terms with increased Beastliness. Only Wolverine seems to miss out, as though his own book restricts development here. There are new characters too - the engaging, trailer-trashy Angel (not Warren) and the amusingly sinister Stepford Cuckoos.

But the main reason for reading New X-Men remains the script, zipping from knowing preposterousness ("My belief-driven super-talents will be equal to the task of stopping the immensity.") through ice-cool grandstanding ("The whole world is watching us now. We must be nothing less than fabulous.") to out-and-out mischief ("She has

Click on Globe returns to contents

had sex though, which is more than any of *us* can say."). In particular, Morrison has a wonderful way with an opening line... just turn to page one for a prime example.

Monthly readers grumbled about certain matters during this story, mostly the uncomfortable mix of art styles. Igor Kordey has a nice Joe Kubert-esque style, but it doesn't blend well with the intricate detail of Frank Quitely. While Kordey handles the smaller sequences well, he understandably struggles with the twenty-people-per-panel pages.

The Verdict: Huge plots, growing characters and immensely quotable dialogue. (RH)

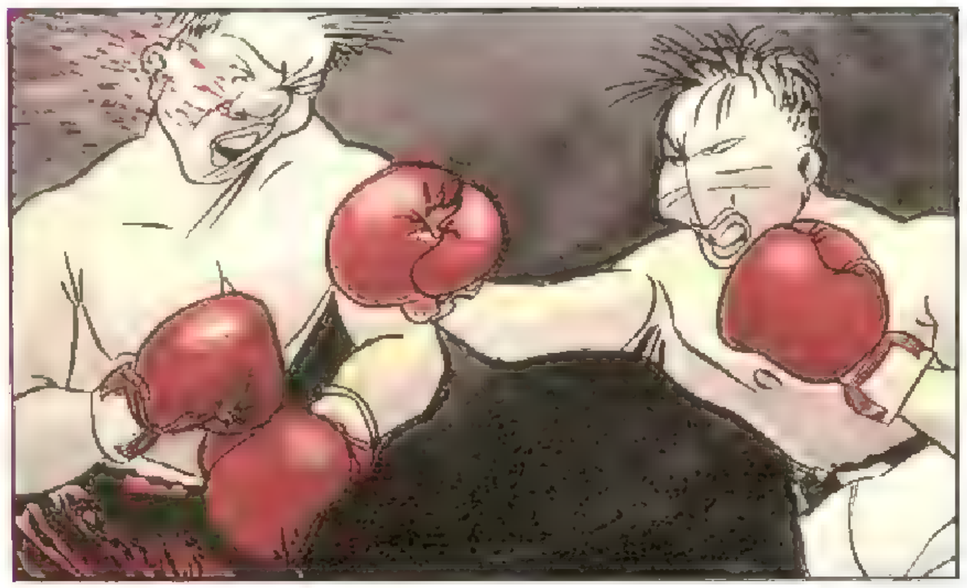
Road To America
Drawn & Quarterly
By Baru and Jean-Marc Thévenet

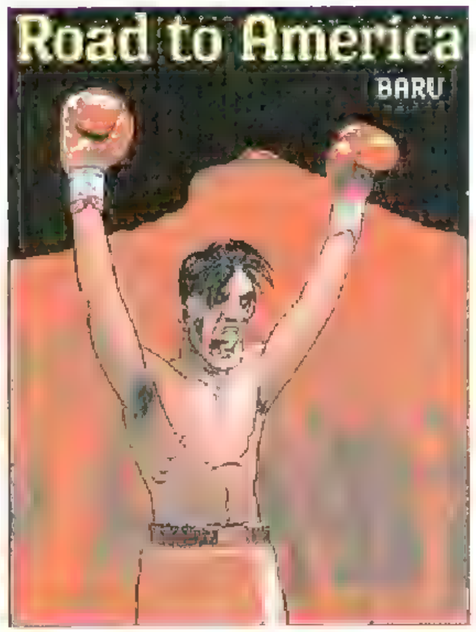
With all the hype surrounding Road to Perdition, I find it ironic that quite possibly a far better graphic novel can be found in Baru's Road To America. For a couple of bucks more than the latest DC edition of Max Allan Collins' book, this Drawn & Quarterly package is not only better value for money, it's also packaged in a way that is becoming synonymous with the smaller publishers like these.

It tells the biography of Said Boudiaf, a French-Algerian boxer who not only became embroiled in the struggle for Algerian independence, but was also a pretty fabulous pugilist. Whereas Road To Perdition was adapted into a Hollywood movie, I can't see the same thing happening here – we've had the *Rockys* and *Raging Bulls* – but it would certainly be an interesting subject to handle: intrigue, violence, romance, causes and determination are just a few elements that are clear from the reading and the execution.

Baru's art, while not pretty, conveys a real sense of the period and the feel of the world, and the story flows without becoming bogged down in the politics of the subject.

This stuff is almost bread and butter bande dessinée, yet compared to so much US-produced material it has a far greater charm and sophistication.





It isn't particularly expensive, it would look good on a coffee table or on shelves, but more importantly you'll think about what you've just read, and it won't be there just for trend value.

The Verdict: A compelling story, which overcomes the sometimes ugly artwork. If you can find a copy then it's well worth spending your money on. (PH)

Spider-Man: Revelations
Marvel
By J Michael Straczynski and John Romita Jr.

At only four issues long, the second collection of the fan-pleasing run by creators Straczynski and Romita Jr. is a swift read, especially as it is not a complete story arc but a string of single issues, two of which are the 9/11 and "Silent Month" episodes.

Despite coming as an abrupt interruption to the cliffhanger ending of the previous collection, the 9/11 episode works well enough despite a few misjudged steps... the inclusion of other costumed characters besides Spidey detracts from the true heroism and horror of that day, and the portrayal of the villains rings far from true. Once that's finished, the main thrust of the remaining stories is Aunt May's discovery of Peter's dual identity and how the two attempt to sustain their relationship. Despite its simplicity, even occasional lapses in accuracy, Romita Jr's art suits the story well but the true star of the team here is writer Straczynski, who brings the character of Peter to the fore and deals more with personalities and crises of conscience than with a villain of the moment. As a result, by making us see more of Peter as a person, he manages to make us feel more for him as he stumbles through life.

The Verdict: Light and with not the tightest focus seen in collections, this is still very enjoyable and worth reading for a more human face of superheroics. (NL)

Strontium Dog: Portrait of a Mutant
Titan Books
By Alan Grant, John Wagner and Carlos Ezquerra

The main story collected here is a surprisingly deep examination of some very relevant moral issues. One of the unique strengths of science fiction is its ability to directly examine philosophical concerns, as it is freed from the shackles of realism. This is superbly exemplified here, as the creative team produce a fine parable about human rights and the problems of being different, that does more in 100-plus pages than Marvel have managed in 30-something years of X-Men comics, while also being an exciting action tale. Ezquerra's art is also highly attractive here, with the gritty look he is famous for well in evidence, and none of the muddiness of his current 2000AD work.

If there is a flaw here, it is that there is far too much unnecessary exposition in both captions and thought bubbles, and some of the dialogue is a little cheesy. However, those flaws do not detract too much from the effective art and multi-layered, intelligent writing.

The second tale is pretty much played for laughs, which is ironic as it has themes in common with the main feature. Johnny Alpha is sent back in time to kidnap Hitler... with hilarious consequences. There is little in the way of depth this time around, but the writing is good enough to keep things on the right side of distasteful. Ezquerra proves to have a knack for WWII art, with some very effective visuals. As a light hearted aside to the main feature, *The Schicklgruber Grab* works very well, especially in view of its similar themes, and together the two stories make a very fine package indeed.

The Verdict: I apologise, Johnny Alpha - you're not an interminably dull character after all! (KG)

Violent Messiahs: The Book of Job
Image
By Joshua Dysart and Tone Rodriguez

Philosophical subject matter in comic books...? Bah. Bloody Miller.

Collecting together the first eight issues of Image's excellent Violent Messiahs series, The Book of Job is a very welcome reprint. Set on Rankor Island, a fictional water-locked US city, the book follows Lt. Cheri Major, an uncompromising (and unpopular) detective charged with

apprehending the violent vigilante, Citizen Pain. Through her pursuit of the mysterious Pain, Major is forced to confront both her crippling anxieties and a past she hoped hidden, and learns that she shares much in common with her quarry.

Now, little of this is particularly original, but what unfolds is an excellent, well-controlled story of two people's struggle to understand the roles they play within the world each inhabits, and their shared battle to impose and explore their individuality. Rankor Island provides an evocative, claustrophobic backdrop to that, with its foreboding sense of isolation and imprisonment. It's a bloody, violent city with a population accustomed to fear.

Art-wise, Tone Rodriguez's realistic panels are well constructed but nothing special. However, his rendition of the enigmatic Pain is a real highlight, initially conveying the character's mystery and menace, and later his new found vulnerability.

The Verdict: This book is a real credit to its creators and publisher. It is intelligent and sophisticated, and well worth the attention of any reader who prefers a pinch of philosophical musing with their vigilante action. (NM)

The Summer of Love
Drawn & Quarterly
By Debbie Drechsler

This is a perfect example of why the US comics industry will have a future after the death of Marvel and DC as we know them today. Drechsler's tale (possibly semi-autobiographical) about a young girl growing up in a sheltered late 1960s community is poignant and at times extremely evocative of this reviewer's own experiences with his peer group when "sex" entered our vocabulary.

As a story it fits nicely into that "voyage of discovery" mould, but is hampered by the turquoise and dark beige colouring throughout. Just as turgid dramas need some light relief from the drudgery, The Summer of Love needed to either be in colour or in black and white; the monotony of the two-colour process ends up making it tough reading. This is a shame, as it is a truly exciting package from a publisher that is rivalling Fantagraphics as the leader in quality US alternative books.

The interesting thing about this book is that most of the characters portrayed in it are likely to be very similar to the people who hang around US high schools and might end up being into comics, yet they wouldn't read books like this. Because it is different it immediately drops off the US comics radar; and I found it quite disturbing that the only mention I've seen of this, on the whole, impressive work has been in the publisher's own PR.

There's an irony in there that may be lost on our "mainstream" US readers.

The Verdict: Expensive and ultimately uninspiring to look at, but the story elevates you, makes you smile and keeps taking you back to parts of it – and that is a sign of a quality product. Recommended. (PH)

ZINE SEEN

Bad Attitude Boy #1
(16 A5 pages. Further details from www.bugmonkey.com)
Zip Gun Presents: Noir
(28 A5 pages. For purchase information email obakeneko@usagimail.com)
Underfire Comics: Ashcan
(12 A5 pages. For purchase information email mail@underfire.co.uk)

These three titles are just a sample of the myriad delights which were available from last month's Caption small press comics festival in Oxford.

Bad Attitude Boy is violent, anarchic, silly and rude, and therefore enormously entertaining. Jim McGee's creation looks like Bill Watterson's Calvin, swears like *Rude Kid* from Viz, and beats the crap out of his friend/foe/fall-guy (the hapless Barfly) with the same deranged enthusiasm ltchy reserves for Scratchy. The scribbly, amateurish art complements rather than detracts from the strip's demented energy.

Behind a lovely colour cover, Noir is an anthology of stories edited by David Goodman, the mastermind behind some of the most joyously entertaining mini-comics of the last few years. Of the six stories here none quite hits the heights of Goodman's best work (including his own contribution *Tell No Tales*), but most are either competently written or illustrated. *Telltale Walkman* by Adrian Brown and Sean Azzopardi provides a nice twist on Edgar Allan Poe's horror

classic *The Telltale Heart*, featuring a man, a murder and a nagging tune, while Arthur Goodman's *Joey Garcia Kills A Guy* manages to be both grim and amusing at the same time. *Business As Usual* is a silent story with a satisfyingly bizarre twist and Richard Corben-esque art.

Underfire Comics are based in Brighton and will be launching a range of quarterly titles next year. This A5 sampler introduces us to forthcoming stories such as Operation: Black Jet, Dream Time and Talisman. Although I'll have to reserve judgement on the stories themselves until Underfire releases its first titles, the art looks uniformly terrific.

The Verdict: Three very different titles, but all worth a look. The future of the UK small press is in good hands, it seems. (AW)

The Bruising Pit:
HMS Elephant Cemetery
Germs Publishing
By John Cake
(For further info contact cale@littleartist.co.uk)

This is truly weird. Not just a bit weird, more like completely and utterly weird. The adventures of Sir Bobby Clamp (who looks a bit like a '70s honky), Sir Walter Benjamin (a besuited skeleton) and Sir Ken Lung (a spin drier with a sense of humour) kick off in a pub and end with an eight-letter word in a game of Scrabble; then go just about anywhere you imagine in between.

Not only is John Cake a capable artist, he is a master of the surreal, stream of consciousness narrative and you have to buy this comic to believe that. Words in a review are never going to do this justice and I know, that sounds like a cop-out, but it isn't.

Did you know there's a Bordeaux in Lancashire? That Malibu is just above Grimsby? No? There you go.

The Verdict: Fish. (DRB)

Dumbass Comics #3
(£2 inc. p&p for 32 US-sized b&w pages from Neil Cameron, 70 Godstow Road, Wolvercote, Oxford OX2 8NY)

Jobo Hairyfoot and Alf Garibaldi work for the special ops division of Neo-Grimsby's Cleaning Services department. They're futuristic refuse collectors in other words, who zip about in a flying dustcart, trading insults and expletives, and more often than not run into big trouble. In this episode the dopey duo accidentally kill the Pope, get chased by Ninja Nuns and narrowly escape being rogered to death by a sexually rampant panda. All in all, writer/artist Neil Cameron's story is a complete hoot from beginning to end, with some sharp dialogue and a plot that is both energetic and engaging. If anything, Cameron's artwork is even stronger than his writing, his grasp of panel and page composition formidable and his figure work nicely redolent of talents such as Steve Rolston and Alan Davis.

On the downside, perhaps Cameron wears his influences a little too visibly on his sleeve at times: the bickering male double act and mockery of Catholicism schtick are already being done perfectly well by a certain Mr. K. Smith of New Jersey, USA.

The Verdict: Hardly the most original small press comic you'll ever read, but certainly one of the most enjoyable. (AW)

Grinning Like Father's Puppet
By "The Dark Sisters"
(For purchase information email a_rubins@yahoo.com or k_rubins@yahoo.com)

Poetry, prose, comics, design – this brief A5 black and white leaflet sums up a whole aspect of small press which has never been mainstream, never will be and probably wouldn't ever wish to be. It's the side where you can take pen and paper and do whatever you want, unbounded by narrative or any other conventions, just expressing yourself. The Dark Sisters happily take hold of it and run riot, swinging from poems of deep unpleasantness to mournful visions of Utopia, even pausing to take a brief swipe at those silly old superheroes. There's nothing deep or meaningful about it – it's just rich, playful entertainment, games without frontiers (and thankfully without Stuart Hall too). It'll while away an hour happily enough.

The Verdict: Disturbing, charming, satisfyingly unique. (MK)

Nucomix #4 and #5
Swan Graphics
By Various

A mixed bag small press British anthology, this one.

The obvious highlight of the two issues is Rik Hoskin and John Doran's *Activist*, which shows a lot of promise and flashes of real storytelling talent. Hoskin and Ade Hughes' *Eccentrix* is also intriguing.

Simon Bowland and Faiz Rehman's *Slay Hunter* is reminiscent of Moore's Miracleman (although not as good), and, although well-written, is a touch derivative. Can't quite understand what a Slay Hunter hunts as well... The remaining fare is passable but hardly ground-breaking.

Not bad, but the creators probably had more fun doing it than I did reading it. And the cover to issue 5 is appalling.

The Verdict: Kind of okay. (NM)

BEAUTIFUL LOSERS

Lionised by the critics, loved by a small hardcore of fans, completely ignored by everybody else – we look at the comics series which vanished far too quickly. This month: Martin Shipp looks at the the weirdest thing to come out of the DC Universe in years...

THRILLER
DC Comics
12 issues - 1983-1984

LATE 1983. Len Wein and Dave Gibbons were about to bring you the new **Green Lantern** (which was the same old **Green Lantern**, but with Dave Gibbons drawing it) and Saturday mornings on ABC were filled with *Rubik The Amazing Cube* and *The Littles*, with proto-boyband Menudo sandwiched inbetween.

Meanwhile, Dick Giordano, in his editorial capacity, was launching something altogether different. **Thriller** was, in a way, a precursor of the later Vertigo line. Although it featured characters with abilities that were, for want of a better word, superpowers, none of them wore costumes (except, perhaps, one) and one of them was dead. But that's not what the book was about.

Thriller was about a cameraman who filmed his brother being decapitated by a terrorist whose sword was kept in a scabbard fitted into the skin down his own spine. It was about faith, and familial love. It was about a man who discovered a cure for cancer and an actor who burned his own face off freebasing cocaine. It was about the reincarnation of Elvis and a man who, through Kundalini yogic practices, achieved total knowledge, stopped living and became a concept.

It was also the second collaboration between the writer Robert Loren Fleming and the artist Trevor Von Eeden; their first was a short story in one of DC's much-missed mystery titles. That in turn had been Fleming's first published work, while Von Eeden's art style was taking a turn for the experimental. Giving two neophytes their own monthly was a risk in itself; what they came up with was so outré it was surely doomed from the start. Their plan was to produce a comic book that told its story from a subjective viewpoint; at all possible times the action would be seen and experienced as it would be by the character undergoing the experience. This meant that for the most part there was no sign of anything resembling conventional storytelling: panels progressed in their own sweet way, meandering around the page, eschewing borders and gutters. One double-page spread wound lazily in a reversed 's', surrounded by an expanse of black.

This also meant that the story was told mainly through its surfaces. There were hardly any thought balloons or captions to reveal a character's motivations or clarify a plot point. It was a method of storytelling that was applauded by many but which alienated many more.

It looked like nothing else on the stands, and it worked: action sequences ran by as dynamically as the opening sequence of a John Woo movie, while the sedate pace dictated by that reverse 's' suited perfectly the domestic scent it illustrated.

By its third issue **Thriller** had

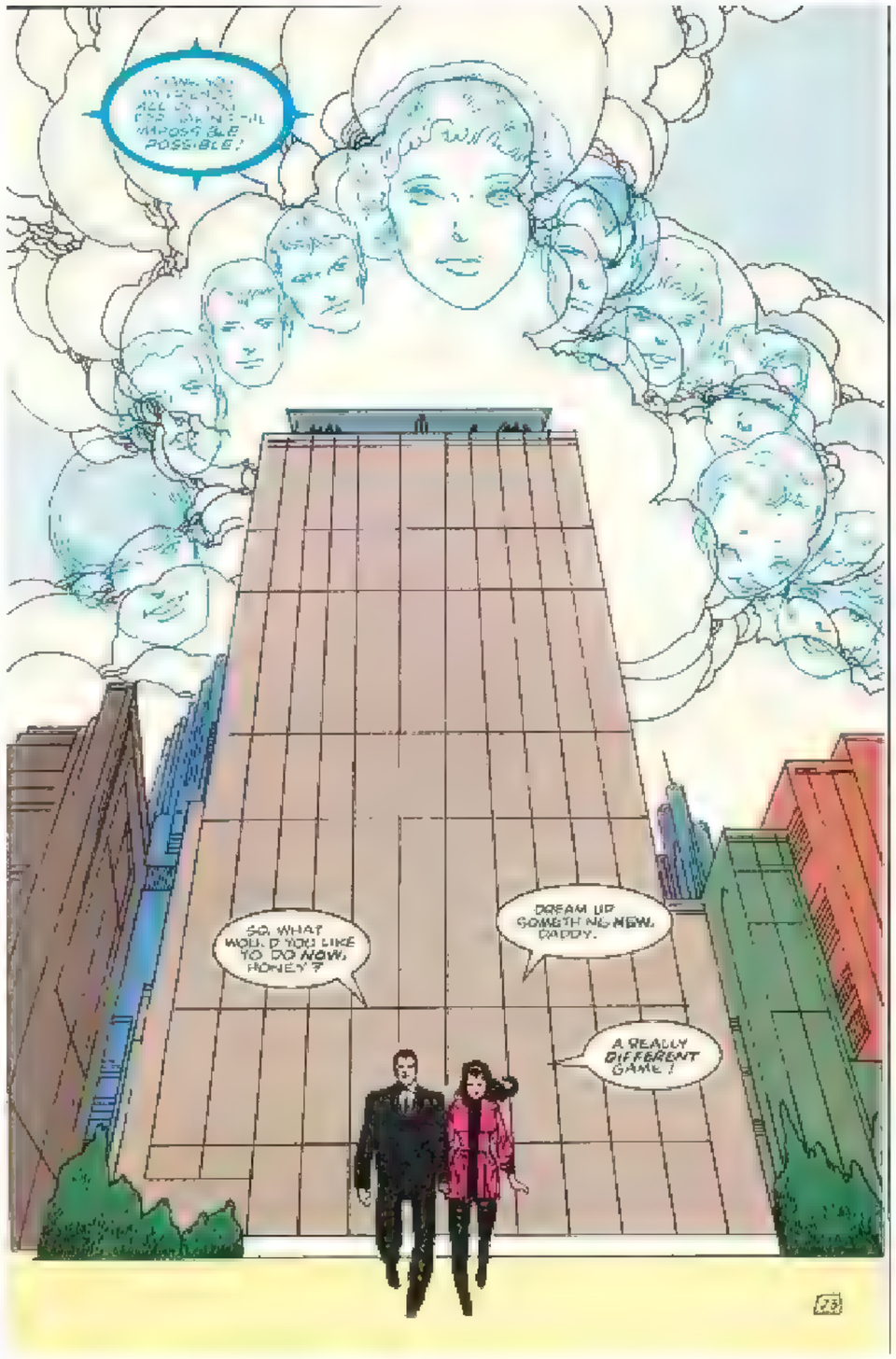
marksman capable of firing a bullet that would intercept another bullet already in flight; the smartest man in the world, who lived in a Rolls Royce; an illegal immigrant safecracker and escape artist; a woman with a literally intoxicating touch; and a seven-feet-tall synthetic Catholic priest. And this didn't sell?

In the fifth issue, Fleming responded to a letter: "I'll be writing **Thriller** until either the book dies or I do". In the seventh, Gold informed the readers that Fleming, although not dead, was off the book. In his place was Warren Comics mainstay Bill DuBay. One issue later, Von Eeden also left, to be replaced by Alex Nino. DuBay did his best, but brought with him his usual collection of rabid Communist Russians and untrustworthy Middle-Easterners. These marred his already flawed continuation of the series, which involved the destruction and resurrection of New York City and the explosion of the entire world's stock of nuclear weapons. He also brought in a third-person narrator which, when changed editors - though Giordano later returned as inker - and Alan Gold was in charge. Gold instigated a text/letters page (entitled "Filler") and it was here that Fleming wrote a more concise version of what **Thriller** was meant to be. Essentially, a woman described as "a cross between Jesus Christ and my mom" is able to foresee possible futures, allowing elaborate schemes and countermeasures to be taken by her representatives, the Seven Seconds. Among the team - alongside the cameraman, the doctor and the actor mentioned above - were a allied with Nino's more traditional take on illustration, turned **Thriller** into an ordinary comicbook.

Alan Gold let the cat out of the bag as he replied to correspondents in issue twelve, alluding to "creative disagreements" between Fleming and Von Eeden. "I would have sat Bob and Trevor down with a keg between them if I thought beer could have bought them back together" he said, and also that he was dismayed that Fleming's "surface-only" storytelling not only seemed inaccessible to readers but also that they were delighting in the inaccessibility, finding a profundity that was actually obscurity. He also admitted that Nino's art made it difficult to distinguish between even established characters. The issue in which Gold said this was **Thriller**'s last.

Robert Loren Fleming moved from **Thriller** to an NYPD Blue-style policier, **Underworld**, which is also well worth checking out, and from there to become Keith Giffen's wordman on many outings, most notably the various **Ambush Bug** mini-series and one-offs. Trevor Von Eeden has pencilled many series for many publishers, most notably a string of Batman stories in **Legends Of The Dark Knight**.

But on the whole, neither has reached the same manic heights they touched with **Thriller**. Standing alone outside DC continuity, the series still stands as fresh and contemporary today as it did in 1983. It's not easy to find, but then it isn't impossible either. It is, however, worth the hunt. Where else will you find an editor explaining what happens on a page because the artist took a risk? Where else will you find an Italian momma with somebody else's eyes? And most of all, where will you ever find another seven-feet-tall synthetic Catholic priest?



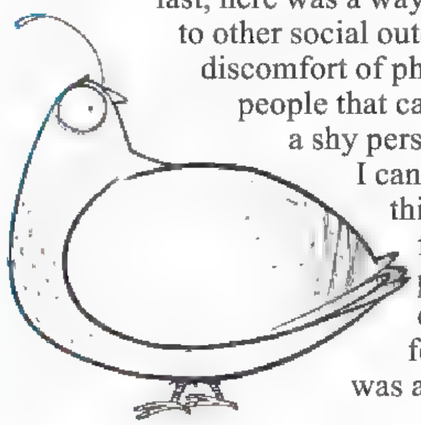
YOUNG GUNS

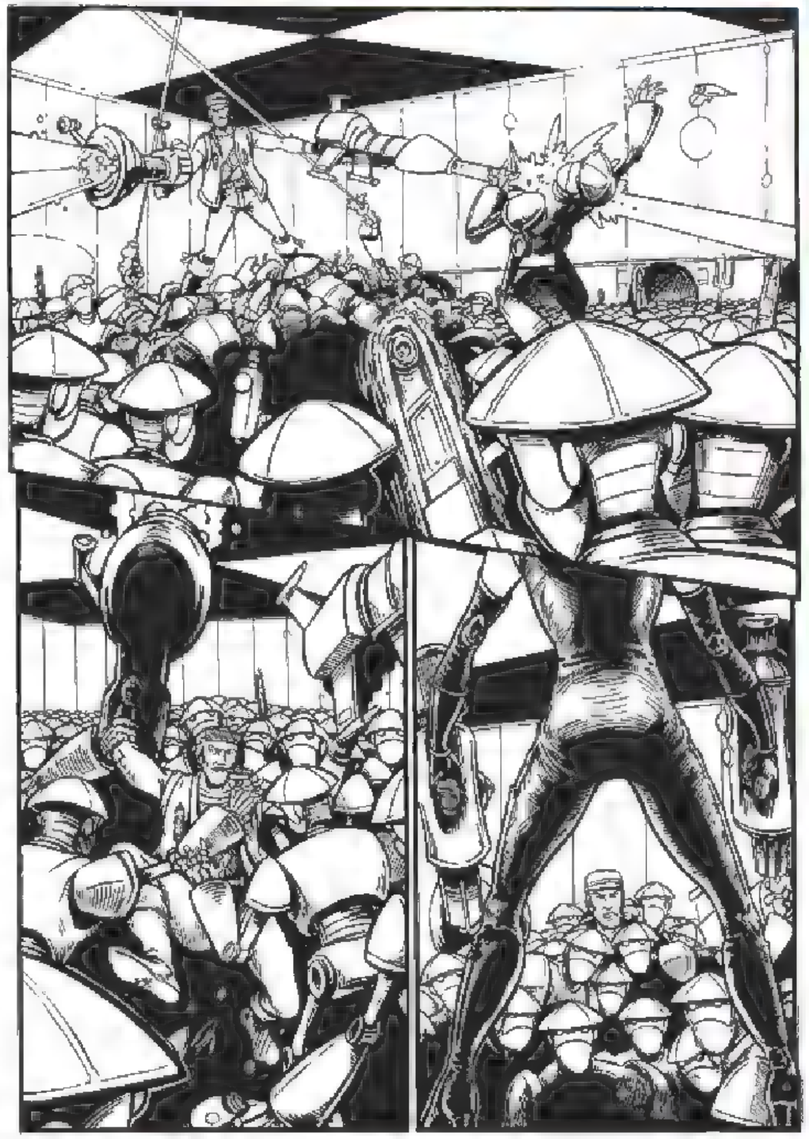
It's not age but talent that determines tomorrow's stars today... this issue: Peet! Clack

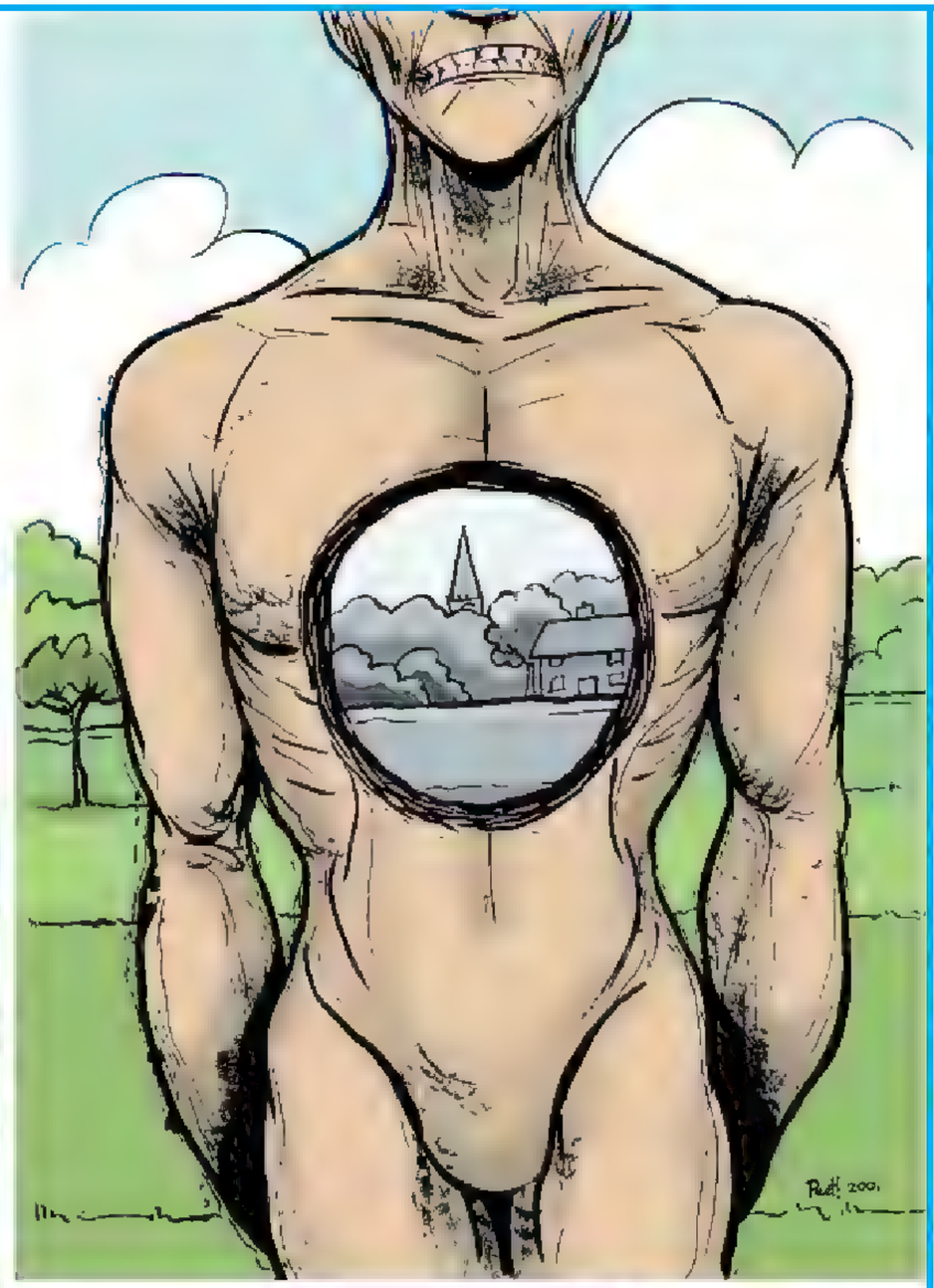
ABANDONED at birth by my Martian parents, I was found floating down the River Cherwell in a dented saucepan. I was discovered by a passing flock of nomadic badgers who raised me as one of their own. However, by the time I reached my teenage years I had tired of a constant diet of worms and slugs and went to art college, which promised a decadent life of beer and pot noodles.

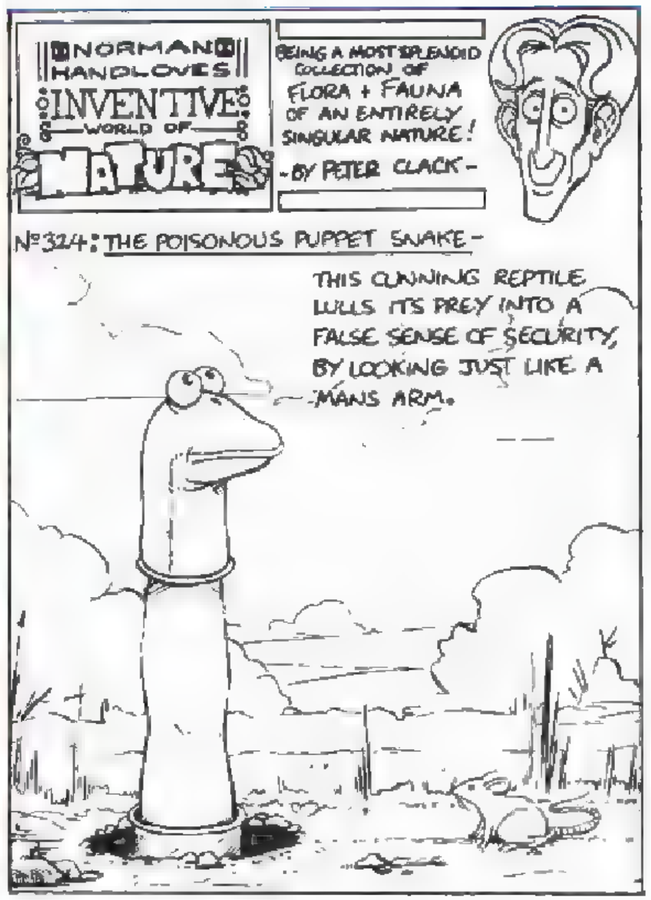
After enjoying a formal art education whilst simultaneously confounding my tutors with an insistence on bringing humour into my art, I nose-dived into a job brought on by the punitive cost of living. Then I was made redundant. Constantly drawing and inventing characters by this time, I surmised that it would be desirable to earn a living doing something that I actually enjoyed. And this is where the story really starts. It was while on a government "let's disguise the unemployment figures" scheme that I finally met like-minded souls/social outcasts.

This was when I made my first abortive attempts in small-press comics. The result was an ill-fated anthology, **Dark Matter**. After years of self-imposed isolation licking the wounds from my first failures, during which I worked at improving my drawing skills, I finally discovered the Internet. At last, here was a way to introduce oneself to other social outcasts without the discomfort of physically meeting people that can be so crippling to a shy person such as myself. I can't stress how much this helped when finally meeting people at conventions/ festivals, as the ice was already broken, so to








NORMAN HANDLOVES
INVENTIVE WORLD OF NATURE
BEING A MOST SPLENDID COLLECTION OF FLORA + FAUNA OF AN ENTIRELY SINGULAR NATURE!
-BY PETER CLACK-
Nº324: THE POISONOUS PUPPET SNAKE-
THIS CUNNING REPTILE LULLS ITS PREY INTO A FALSE SENSE OF SECURITY, BY LOOKING JUST LIKE A MANS ARM.

A LITTLE LATER
WELCOME TO MY HUMBLE HOME COME INSIDE FOR A BITE TO EAT, AND I'LL TELL YOU MORE ABOUT IT IT REALLY IS A MOST AMAZING DISCOVERY!

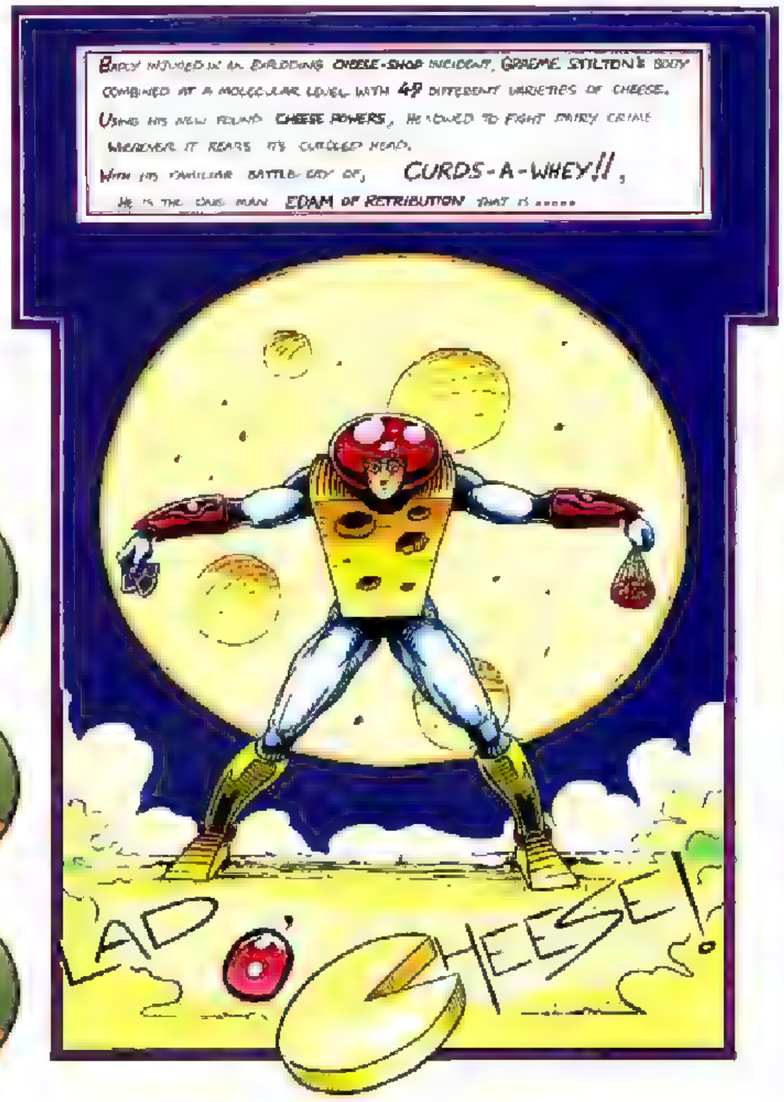
speak. If there is anyone reading this who would love to get into the comics scene but is terminally shy, I really would recommend joining in with Internet discussion groups. It has helped me no end, and I really wish I'd done it sooner. So where am I at now?

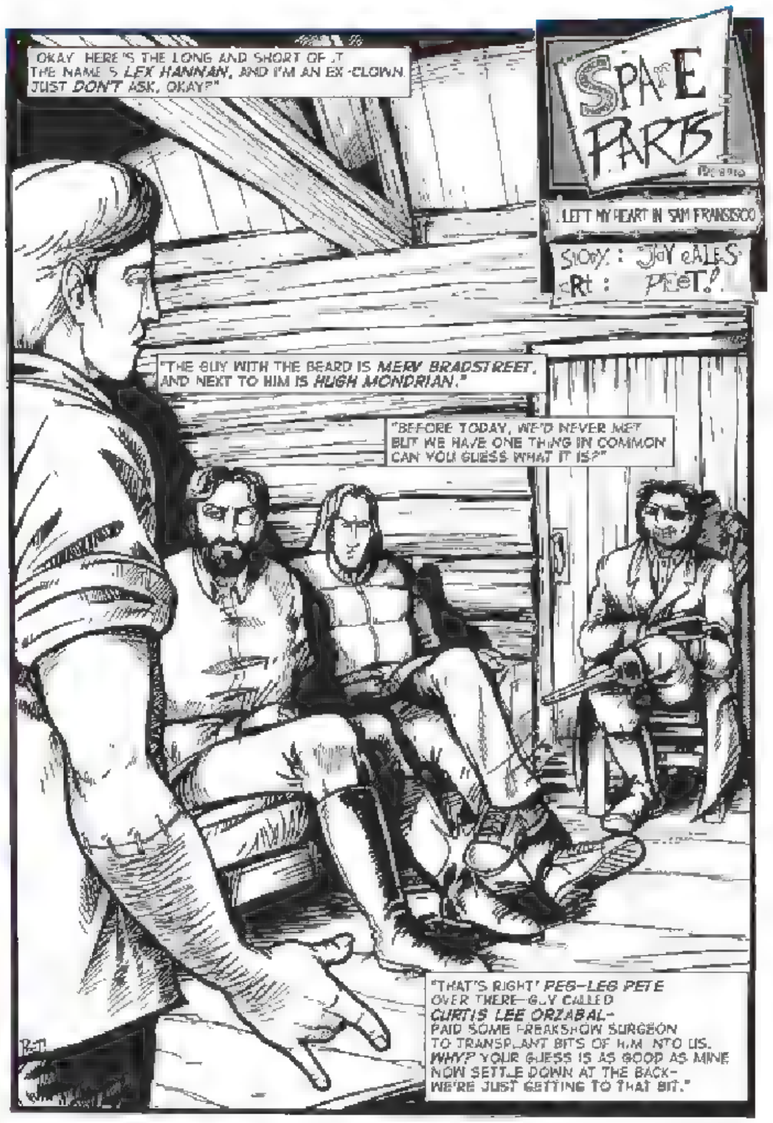
As a full-time Home Daddy, I currently have the luxury of not having to go out to work during the day. In theory this should allow me to do lots of drawing, but alas small children do not respect theory and in practice I still end up slaving over a hot drawing board late into the night on a regular basis.

But that's dedication for you. I have recently had work in a variety of small-press publications - such as *Spare Parts* in **Violent!**, written by Jay Eales; a Sam Slade/ Durham Red strip in **Zarjaz** #2, written by Mat Thomas; *Dosh &Pecs Do Time Travel*, written by Andy Winter and featured in **Devilchild**; and *Furlough*, written by Paul Ferry, in **The Girly Comic**.

I'm really enjoying working with lots of different people in small press comics at the moment, so I'm looking forward to doing more.

Aside from the obvious long-term plan for total world domination, I would love to go professional at some point soon, hopefully full-time as soon as the kids start school. So I am trying to get as much experience working with others as I can. It's




OKAY HERE'S THE LONG AND SHORT OF IT
THE NAME'S LEX HANNAN, AND I'M AN EX-CLOWN
JUST DON'T ASK, OKAY?"
SPARE PARTS
I LEFT MY HEART IN SAN FRANSISCO
STORY: JAY EALES
ART: PEET!
"THE GUY WITH THE BEARD IS MERV BRADSTREET, AND NEXT TO HIM IS HUGH MONDRIAN."
"BEFORE TODAY, WE'D NEVER MET BUT WE HAVE ONE THING IN COMMON CAN YOU GUESS WHAT IT IS?"
"THAT'S RIGHT' PEG-LEG PETE OVER THERE- G.V CALLED CURTIS LEE ORZABAL- PAID SOME FREAKSHOW SURGEON TO TRANSPLANT BITS OF H.M INTO US. WHY? YOUR GUESS IS AS GOOD AS MINE NOW SETTLE DOWN AT THE BACK- WE'RE JUST GETTING TO THAT BIT."

particularly valuable working with various writers and also working to deadlines.

I have a couple of my own projects that I would like to develop when I'm happy that my writing abilities are up to it, including *Captain Bastard*, about a guy who wants to be the best super-villain ever but has the odds stacked against him. I'd also like to develop my illustration work and painting, as I'm currently writing a children's book about dinosaurs. Other than that I'd just like to continue with the enduring passion of my life, learning to be the best artist that I possibly can.

Contact: *reetpeet@mac.com*
Website: *http://homepage.mac.com/reetpeet/peet/index.html*

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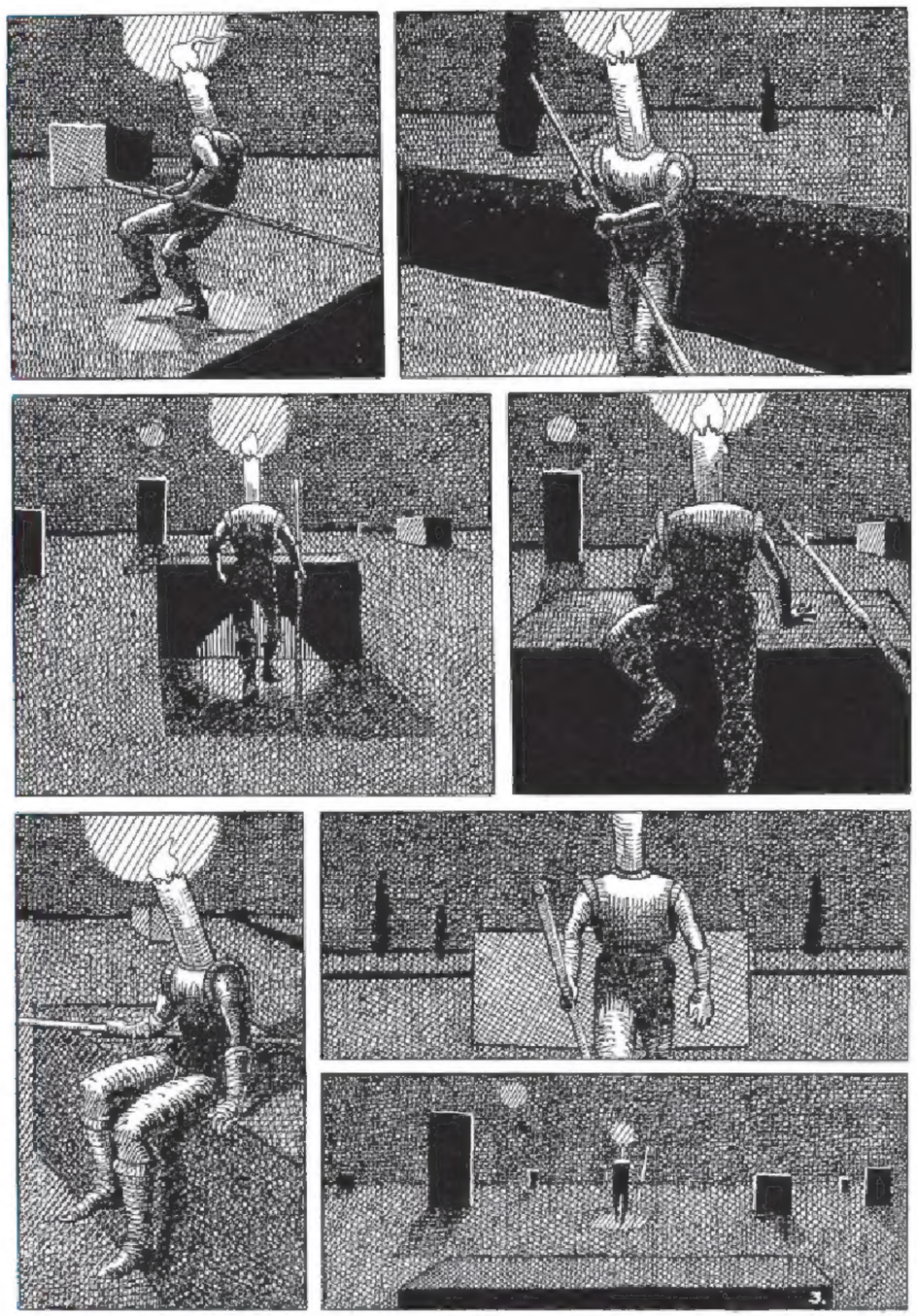
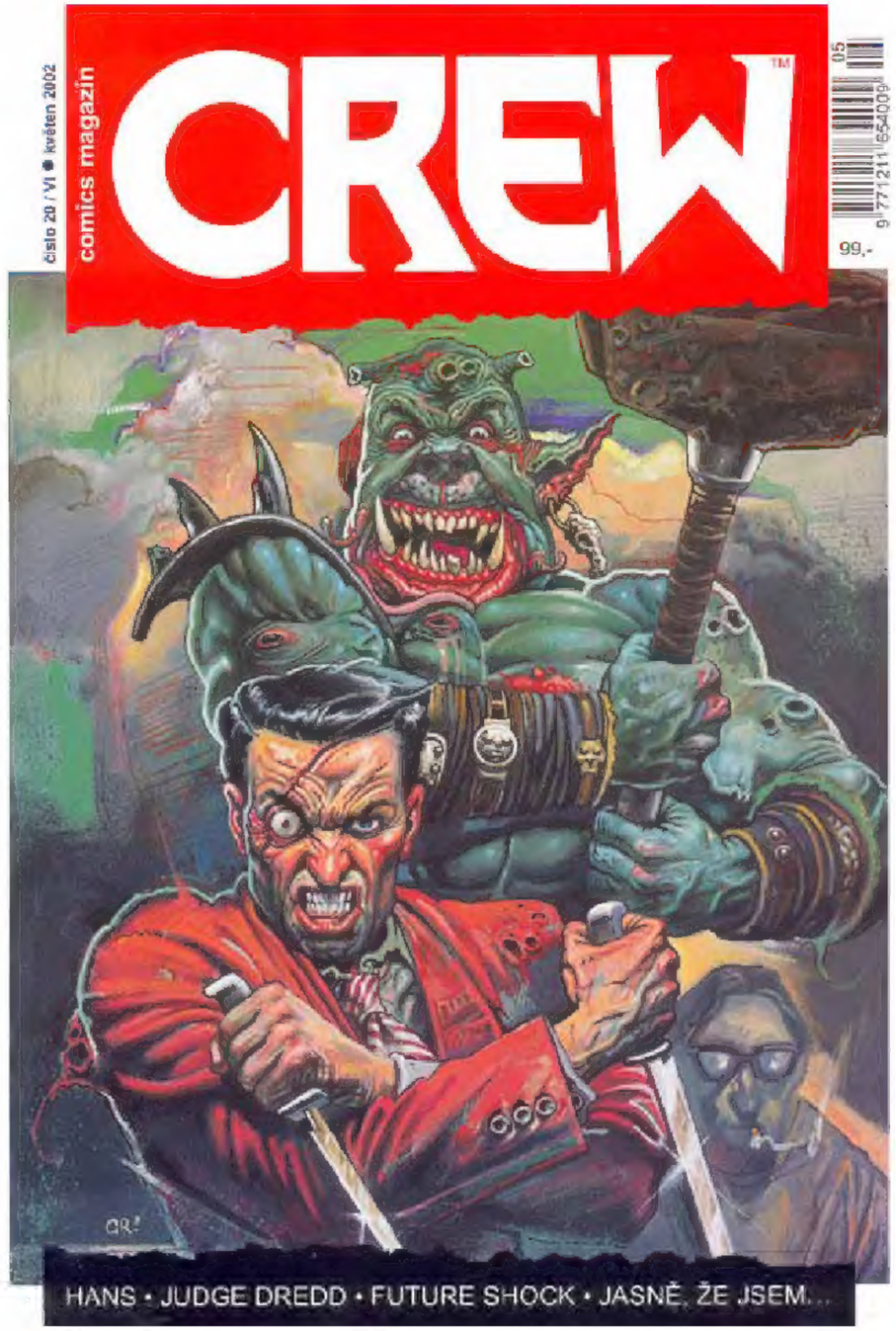
KRESLÍCÍ PRKNO

THE CZECH CONNECTION



Jiri Zimcik [b. 1976] - left - Illustrator and scriptwriter. Jiri Zimcik loves the naïve American and European comics of the 1950s and 1960s. He plays gently with the typical characteristics of old comics, placing them in new contexts and creating a very sophisticated style of humour. However, from time to time he also creates totally surreal stories.
Style: A clean irony and retro style are typical of his drawing style. For the most part he uses clear lines, but he can change his style radically when need be.
Has appeared in: *Pot*.
Contact: *sektor_yx-c@volny.cz* , *www.volny.cz/sektor_yx-c/*



Jiri Grus [b. 1978] - right - Painter, illustrator and scriptwriter, student of the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague. He has twice been a prizewinner at the Polish comics festival in Lodz (winning the prize for the best black and white story in 2000, and the first prize in 2001). Cyborgs, bizarre sex and very black humour are typical of his comics. Grus collaborates full time with scriptwriter Stepan Kopriva.
Style: Cyberpunk, dynamic, but pretty realistic; no other young Czech artist knows human anatomy as well as he. Grus's black and white comics are as excellent as the ones he paints in watercolour or oil.
Has appeared in: *Bublinky*, **Crew**, *AARGH!*, *Pot*, *Zivel*, Polish catalogues **Komiks 2000** and **Komiks 2001**.
Contact: *keporkak@hotmail.com*

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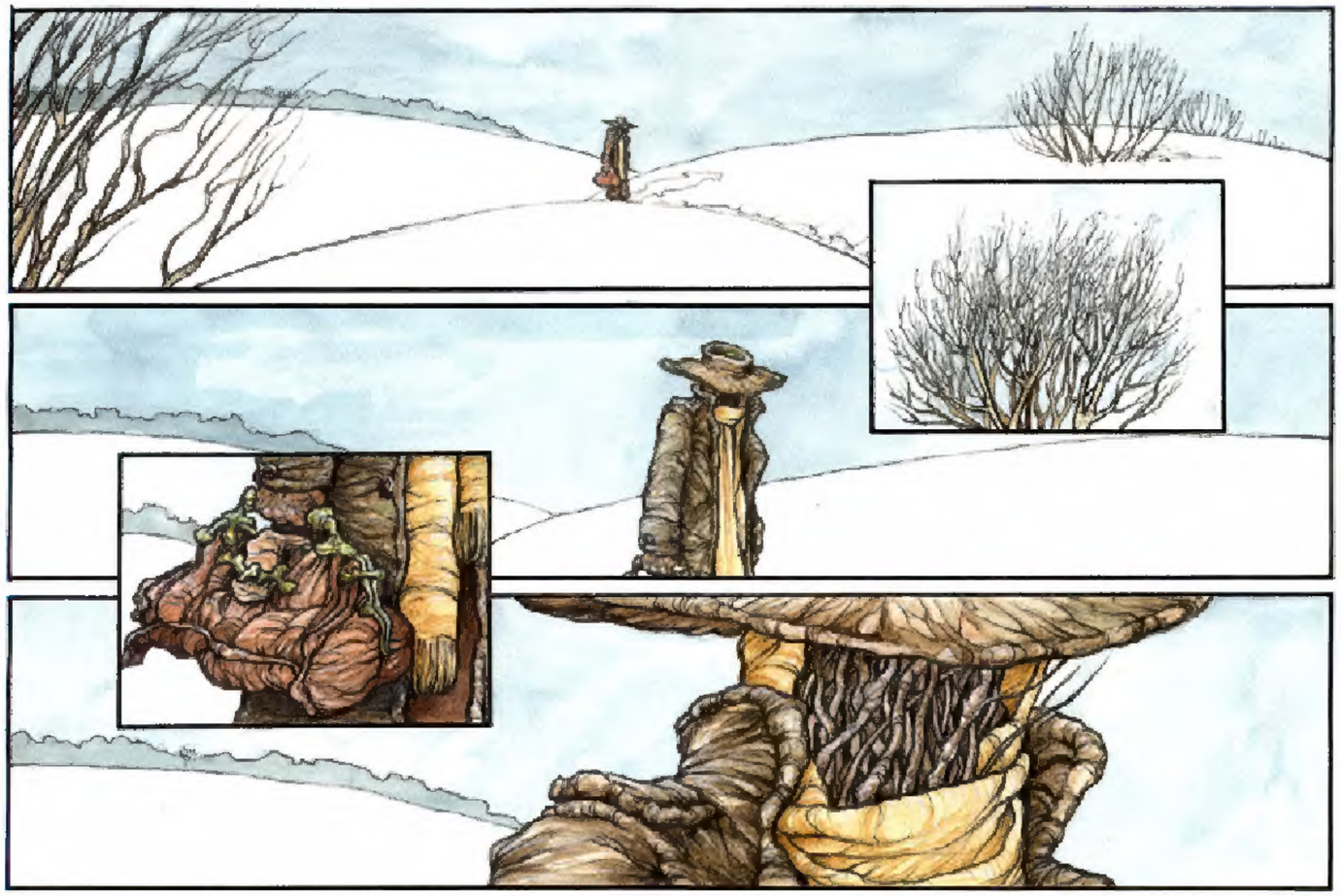
STÁLI TAM
V MÝ ZABLEŠENÝ PÍSEČ, PLESNIVÝM SPLOHU S POBLITOU PODLAHOU A VYTOPANÝMA PAŘÍTKAMA
ANDĚLÉ
POZLOŽILI SVÝ BÍLÝ PEGUTĚ PO STĚNÁCH MÝHO DOUPĚTE
A JEJICH CHLÁCHOLIVÁ ZÁŘE VYPLNILA KAŽDIČKOU ŠKVÍŘKU KOLEM MÝHO ROZTŘESENÝHO TĚLA
PAK KE MNĚ JEDEN Z NICH VZTÁHL RUKU A PROMLUVIL...
PÁN TĚ MÁ RÁD, LEMUĚLI
VÍ, ŽE SE OD NĚJ NEODVRACÍŠ
MILUJE TĚ
BYL JSI JÍM VYVOLEN
NENÍ SE ČEHO BÁT, LEMUĚLI
POTŘEBUJE TĚ SE SVÝMI PLÁNY NA OBNOVU SVĚTA, PŘESNĚ DLE SVÉHO PLÁNU
A UPROSTŘED TOHO VŠEHO SE NAJDE I TVŮJ MALÝ PLÁNEK
JSEM TĚ MILUJÍCÍ OTEC, JSEM TVÝM BOŽÍM STVOŘITELEM
A PROTO SE MI BUDEŠ PODŘÍZENĚ KLANĚT!

Milos Mazal [b. 1981] - left -
Illustrator and scriptwriter, student of the Faculty of Fine Arts in Ostrava. He is fascinated by the strange world of religion, and his stories often describe the eternal fight between Man and his God.
Style: Mazal means "schlock artist" in Czech, but the truth is very different! His style is similar to that of Grus – however, he uses only pen and ink.
Publications: **Crew**.
Contact: *maharan@email.cz*

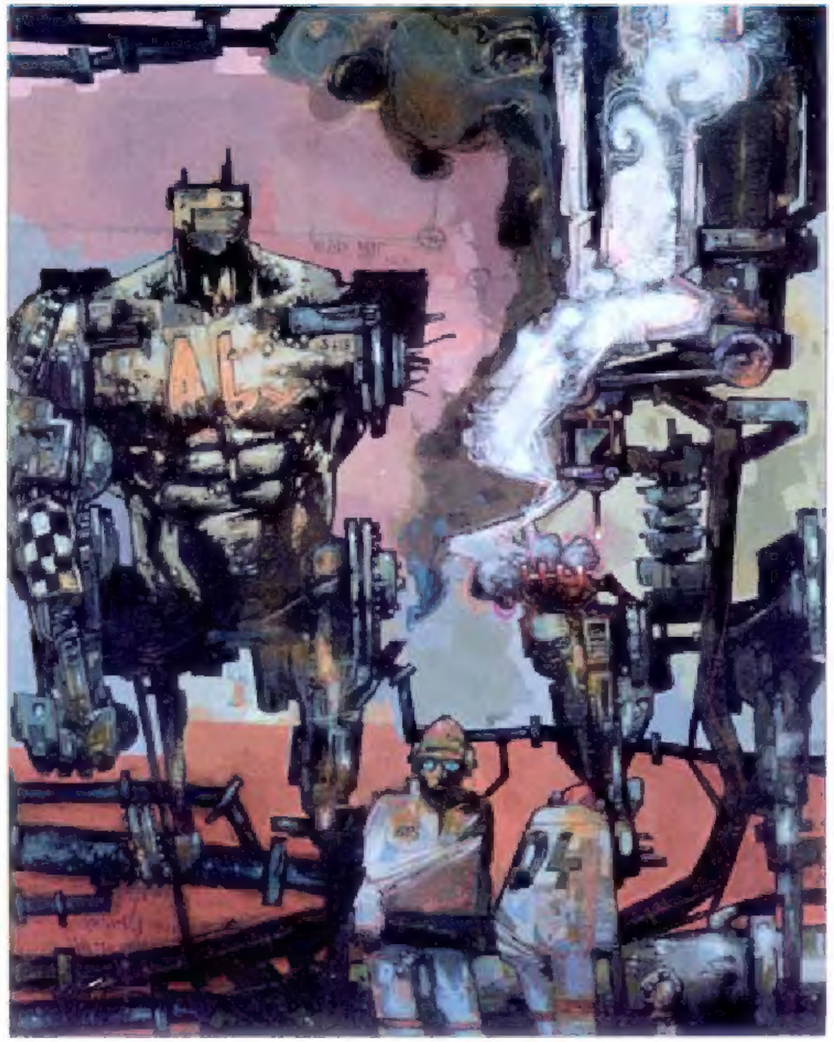
Tomas Kucerovsky [b. 1974] - below -
Illustrator, scriptwriter and co-editor of the fanzine *AARGH!*, he graduated from the Faculty of Architecture at the university in Brno, where he now works as chief designer in a company producing computer games. He mostly creates wordless, atmospheric comics and is much more interested in the inner worlds of his characters than in action. He often collaborates with scriptwriter Tomas Prokupek.
Style: His style varies and has many roots – Czech art nouveau as well as Dave McKean and Andreas (the German creator of the Franco-Belgian series **Rork**).
Has appeared in: *Tamto*, *AARGH!*, *Pot* and Polish zine *AQQ*.
Contact: *tomas@altarinteractive.com*



Karel Jerie [b. 1977] - above -
Painter, illustrator and scriptwriter, student of the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague. The Czech reanimator of **Octobriana** also works with stories from Ancient Greece and the Middle Ages. He takes pleasure in drawing the curves of drapery, bright armour, and dramatic gestures.
Style: His godfathers are Gustav Doré and Wilhelm Busch – Jerie's approach is classical, but reflects the techniques of modern comics.
Has appeared in: *Pot*, *Novy prostor* and *AARGH!*.
Contact: *kareljerie@hotmail.com*

Tomas Jirku [b. 1971] - above -
Illustrator and scriptwriter. He likes to draw long and complex fantasy stories flavoured with gentle humour. The realms he creates are populated with inept knights, aggressive princesses and other crazy creatures. He currently lives and works in the USA.
Style: Tomas Jirku likes Mike Mignola, but he is also very much influenced by the same children's illustrative tradition as is Pavel Cech.
Individual publications: **Ruddy/O kutilce** (in collaboration with Pavel Cech)
Has also appeared in: *Brnenske povesti, Pohadkovy svet komiksu 2000* and *AARGH!*.
Contact: *hoblin2@hotmail.com*

Pavel Cech [b. 1968] - below -
Painter, illustrator and scriptwriter. Creator of large oil paintings, book covers and illustrations for children's books. He is enchanted by the work of Jaroslav Foglar, especially by his **Fast Arrows**. Cech's comics are full of old spooky streets, derelict gardens, mysterious lights in fog - but also of faith in the positive nature of our existence.
Style: Pavel Cech is one of the best representatives of the typical Czech school of drawing poetic illustrations for children.
Individual publications: **Dobrodruzstvi Honzy Stistka** (script by Zdenek Chlubny), **Ruddy/O kutilce** (in collaboration with Tomas Jirku)
Has also appeared in: *Rovnost*, *Pohadkovy svet komiksu 2000*, *Neon*, *AARGH!*, *Halo Brno*, *Bobri stopou* and international anthology **Stripburek**.
Contact: *pavel_cech@volny.cz*



Wladimir Broz, a.k.a. Wladimir518 [b. 1978] - above -
Illustrator and scriptwriter. At the moment he is a rapper with the best Czech hip-hop group, Peneri strycka Homeboye, and one of the most important members of the Prague graffiti scene. He is fascinated by superhero comics as well as by the poetry of the suburbs. Wladimir518's works often reflect the social problems of city life, too.
Style: His expressive work in acrylics is somewhat influenced by Bill Sienkiewicz and his followers, but Wladimir518's collage comics are thoroughly original and intense.
Has appeared in: **Terrorist**, *AARGH!*, *Zivel*, German magazine *LoDown* and the international anthology **Stripburek**.
Contact: *wladimir518t@hotmail.com*

WORLD OF HEROS

their Chris of imaginations & the of Heros to scour team investigative for continue World all kinds bollocks...Spicer

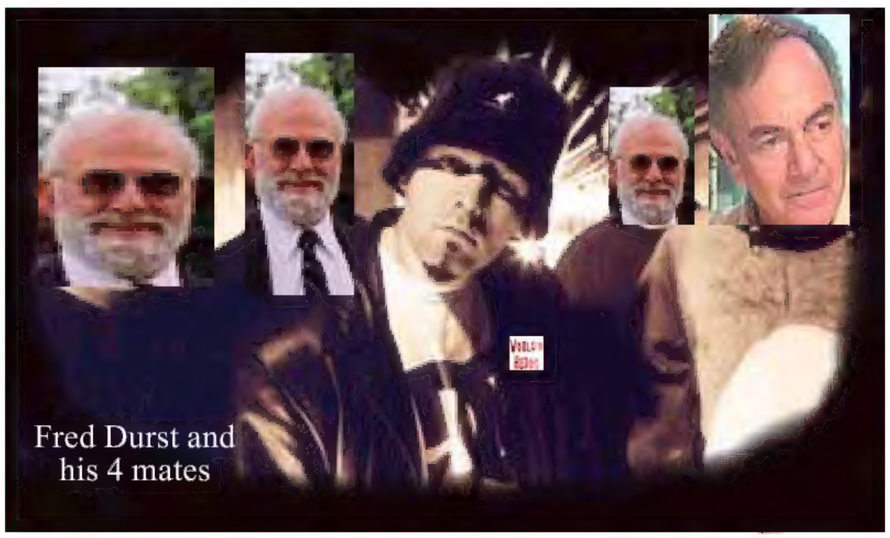
YOUNG AMERICAN COMIC READER PUMPS FIST, SHOUTS "DUDE!"

CALIFORNIA, USA - Comic reader Greg Mussey became so excited by a recent issue of **Batman** that he pumped his fist in a victorious fashion, and was even heard to loudly proclaim the word "Dude!"

Asked to explain his behaviour, Mussey, 17, said "I was reading **Batman**, and he was like, pow! layin' the smack down, and the bad guys were like, yeah, whatever, we can take this batdude, and Batman's like, no WAY, and they shoot at him, and he's like zap! Zoom! And they can't touch him, and then smack! And they're on the floor all messed up an' shit, and I was like, dude! That dude Batman? He's the man. Like, a bat, man. Dude."

Mussey, who lists his other hobbies as playing video games, listening to Nu-

Metal, and "hangin'", apparently sees himself as a bit of a writer. "Yeah, I got this sick idea for a comic," he told us. "It's about this skater, right, and he's got these, like, super powers, and he's, like, this super-powered skater. Only, he looks like Fred Durst. And when he's not skating or saving, like, hot chicks from aliens an' getting laid an' shit, he, like, uses his powers to play practical jokes an' shit on his friends, like making 'em eat crap and burning their pubes off with his laser eyes and shit. That comic'd like, totally rock. I sent it to a bunch of comic companies, but those pussies at Marvel and DC were like, no way. They've, like, totally got their heads up their asses. But those dudes at Image, they said they were interested."



Marvel and DC refused to comment on Greg's proposed comic. Image's Todd McFarlane, however, told us: "That comic is, like, totally awesome! Dude!"

COMIC BOOK LEGAL DEFENCE FUND FUND TO BRING AID TO COMIC BOOK LEGAL DEFENCE FUND

A GROUP of well-intentioned comics fans have grouped together to aid some of the worst-off writers supporting the Comic Book Legal Defence Fund.

Carlotta Sanz, the head of the Comic Book Legal Defence Fund Fund, or CBLDFF, told us: "The Comic Book Legal Defence Fund is a wonderful cause, protecting the rights to free speech of creators and shop-owners alike, and I have nothing but respect for the creators who donate their time and effort to supporting it. It's just... well, just look what some of those creators have been doing recently. Frank Miller is one of the most outspoken supporters of the CBLDF, and did you read The Dark Knight Strikes Back? It's such a shame that he's devoting so much of his time to charitable work that his writing has to suffer so much. And what about Neil Gaiman? His charity work has left him so utterly devoid of any interesting new ideas whatsoever that he's had to go back to writing Sandman spin-offs, despite swearing that he'd never do such a thing. And then there's Peter David..."

Sanz is in the process of setting up a website where people can make donations to the Fund Fund. However, she isn't just looking for monetary donations. "Sure, a little bit of cash to help cover set up costs wouldn't go amiss, but I'm not trying to do one of those stupid Paypal sites - everyone knows that no-one will buy stuff off the Internet," Sanz told us. "I mean, I am looking for money, but what I'm really hoping will be donated is what these writers need the most - good ideas. I mean, how much do you think Mark Waid would give for a decent plotline right now?"

We tried contacting Waid for a comment, but unfortunately he was still under quarantine placed upon him by microbiologists attempting to locate his sense of humour.

Mark Waid at the latest CBLDFF meeting with some fellow creators who, with the aid of Neil Diamond masks, kept their identities hidden from us and Mr Waid.

JIM SHOOTER RETURNS TO COMICS

PITTSWANG, SWEDEN - Former Marvel head honcho Jm Shooter is back into comics! The very tall and spotty ex-editor in chief of Marvel was spotted leaving Ralf's Comics Emporium carrying a copy of Amazing Spider-Man, two WildStorm comics of an indiscriminate nature, a small bra believed to be for a petite 19-year-old who can pretend to be much younger, four lewd paperbacks, a small photograph of Janet Jackson and a sponge. When our reporter approached Shooter, the 11' 3" tall publisher threatened him with an inflatable banana and was heard shouting, "Will you fucking leave me alone? I don't want to buy any insurance from you and I've never met anyone called Gladys Thripple. Who are you people? Why are you tormenting me so?" Then he threw a folder believed to contain trading cards from the World of Plasm at us...